

Screen



Interracial families in Hollywood

Sound in Turkish popular cinema

Urban mapping of virtual space

Technological imperative in computer animation

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Six Degrees of Separation (Fred Schepisi 1993) Distributors MGM and UIP Picture courtesy BFI Stills

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Mute bodies, disembodied voices: notes on sound in Turkish popular cinema

NEZİH ERDOĞAN

A paradigmatic shift

In 1997, veteran film star Tanju Gursu won the award for best male actor at the Antalya Golden Orange Film Festival for his role in *Kopekler Adası/Isle of Dogs* (Halit Refiğ, 1997). The jury's decision provoked heated debate because Gursu's character had been post-dubbed by another film and theatre actor, Muşfik Kenter. It was questioned whether an actor who borrowed someone else's voice should be honoured with such an award. In connection with this, a newspaper published a series of interviews with various well-known personalities, who expressed a range of opinions on the matter. Burçak Evren, film historian and critic, claimed that dubbing 'prevented film from naturalness and it became something artificial'. The young film director Mustafa Altıoklar emphasized the concept of 'credibility': 'When a film is post-dubbed it is no longer convincing – hence the lack of sincerity. When you shoot the film with sound the player feels the magic more easily.' Şener Şen, the star of *Yeşilçam*, the mainstream cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, and now superstar of the New Turkish Cinema, referred to the difficulties of dubbing: 'The player forgets the feelings of that particular moment of the shoot and during the dubbing he tries hard to remember them'. Altıoklar argued further that 'Cinema is fifty per cent sight and fifty per cent sound, ignoring the sound means we start filming with only the remaining fifty per cent'.¹ This chimes with the claim made by the television

1 Zafire Öztürk, 'Türk sineması "ses" diyor / Turkish cinema claims sound', *Radikal*, 23 October 1997, p. 18.

celebrity Cem Ozer, that 'the Yeşilçam actor is sixty per cent absent from the cinema'.

Dubbing, which was standard practice for Yeşilçam, is central to the debates about sound in the emerging New Turkish Cinema. It is a practice which seems unlikely to survive the shift to a new paradigm in which the keywords are 'credibility', 'naturalness' and 'sincerity' – a clear break from Yeşilçam's mode of representation. Although New Turkish Cinema does not seek to disown the heritage of its predecessor entirely, Yeşilçam's conventional use of sound seems to have been abandoned.

The mid 1980s witnessed an attempt at a radical break with Yeşilçam. A number of filmmakers tried their hands at new themes and styles which, roughly speaking, reflected the changing role of women, an increasingly liberal economic policy, the growing interest in various sorts of self-reflexive fiction, and the stylistic influence of television commercials and pop videos. In the latter, I am referring particularly to a visual style which, for example, avoided the flat lighting, highly saturated colour and minimal camera movement favoured by Yeşilçam.² In contrast, New Turkish Cinema tended to play on high-key and low-key lighting, chiaroscuro and use of a travelling camera. It was not until 1996, however, that the filmmakers took the final step: one by one they dropped post-dubbing and started shooting with sound. The audience thus saw for the first time the famous Dolby Digital train precede a Turkish film, *Eşkîya/The Bandit* (Yavuz Turgul, 1995), which quickly became a blockbuster. *Eşkîya* was a Eurimages film, welcomed by the film writers for being as technically flawless as any Hollywood film. Yavuz Turgul, who used to write screenplays for the late Ertem Eğilmez (a director of stereotypical melodramas), did not try to disguise the film's Yeşilçam roots. A documentary on the making of the film shows him on set, lecturing on how Yeşilçam is too easily condemned for its limitations when it should in fact be taken seriously. Indeed, *Eşkîya* addresses issues that Yeşilçam had raised again and again: money versus love, love versus paternal responsibility, dedication versus individual freedom, all boiling down to redemption and sacrifice. Some recent popular films, for example *Ağır Roman/Cholera Street* (Mustafa Altıoklar, 1997), *Dar Alanda Kısa Paslaşmalar/Offside* (Serdar Akar, 2000), *Hemşol/Compatriot* (Ömer Uğur, 2000), and even a very successful television serial, *İkinci Bahar/Second Spring* (dir. Turkan Derya, tx 2000–2001, designed by Turgul) seem to have taken a similar tack. However, this thematic continuity is overshadowed by some of the practices adopted by New Turkish Cinema, in addition to shooting with sound, the tendency to construct 'genuine' characters (as against the non-psychological types of Yeşilçam) yielded an altogether different mode of representation. As I will try to demonstrate, the actor's body is the site of this difference.

2 For an account of transition from Yeşilçam to New Turkish Cinema see the entry 'Turkish cinema' by Nezihe Erdoğan and Deniz Gökçürk in Oliver Leaman (ed.) *Companion Encyclopedia of Middle Eastern and North African Film* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001) pp. 537–9.

The criticism levelled against dubbing overlooks the fact that auditory practices are socially constructed and their terms can be challenged by the same values they have adopted. One need only recall the account given by Michel Chion of a Frenchman who travelled to Britain in 1929 to attend the screening of a talking film for the first time. Although the film was perfectly synchronized, he wrote later, 'it was extremely annoying for it strengthened the audience's demand for credibility'. 'But we now know how the film sound developed', says Chion, 'along the lines of establishing tolerances, approximations'.³ Tolerances may negate and even replace each other, and what is regarded as annoying today may be tolerated tomorrow or vice versa. By tolerance I am referring to a function of the audiovisual contract mutually conceived by the cinematic institution and the viewing subject. In this essay I will discuss some aspects of this contract in its relation to the body as constituted by Yeşilçam. For the sake of convenience, I will limit my essay to two main issues: first, understanding the practice of dubbing in a framework given by the cinematic apparatus which embodies the configurations of the voice and the body; second, 'loss of sight', a recurrent theme in melodrama which becomes symptomatic in its play on characters' sensory perception. These issues demand closer analysis in relation to the development of diverse sound practices.

In discussing this, I want to consider Tom Levin's elaboration of the powers of apparatus. Originating from a conversation between Martin Heidegger and a Japanese philosopher who insistently argues that western technology appropriates practices of the 'other' into the structure of its own cinematic inscription, Levin refers to Theodor Adorno's and Hanns Eisler's contention that no matter how radical and innovative these practices may be, 'they are ultimately put in an apparatus which spits them out again in a digestive, blunted, and conventionalised form'.⁴ What he implies is that apparatus is something like a box which takes in cinematic practices, gives them a form of its own and then spits them out. This topography collapses right away, because any kind of practice is plausible only in terms of its apparatus. As James Lastra states in his criticism of Levin's argument: 'there is no identifiable "thing" which can be put in apparatus, because there is no thing-to-be represented outside the goals of the very act of representing'.⁵ It is, of course, crucial to note that Lastra is not arguing that apparatus grants diverse sound practices a right to existence, but rather that sound can be designed, produced and thus 'heard' only in reference to, and within the confines of, the apparatus. Similarly, my premiss is that Yeşilçam was able to produce a sort of resistance (not in the form of negation but of negotiation) to the cinematic apparatus from within.⁶ In order to grasp the nature and potential of Yeşilçam's resistance, I will try to show how it oscillated between non-illusionism and classical realism. Thus, while Yeşilçam operated with the codes of realism,

3 Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia Press, 1999), p. 13.

4 Tom Levin, 'The acoustic dimension of cinema', in *Screen*, 25, 3 (1994), p. 51.

5 James Lastra, 'Reading the film: a critical history of the film', in *Screen*, 25, 3 (1994), p. 12.

6 This essay is based on a research project funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, D.C., 1998-2000.

7 For a discussion of this see
 Kezban Guleryuz 'Sinema ve
 turksek gerceklik' / Cinema and the
 Turkish way of reality *Yeni
 Turkiye* nos 23/24 (1998)
 pp 3156–7

the operation itself always failed to meet the requirements of a fully-fledged realist text. Indeed it might be asked if Yeşilçam, as a commercial cinema which is today best known for its naivete, bears a striking resemblance to Brechtian alienation effects.⁷ However, instead of hastily appropriating Yeşilçam into Brechtian terms, I would rather draw attention to the tradition of Turkish non-illusionism it inherited. This includes *Karagöz* (shadow play), which uses two-dimensional cut-out figures, *Orta Oyunu* (a form of theatre largely inspired by the *commedia dell'arte*), whose cast consists of comic types, and *Meddah*, a one-man show in which the performer deliberately interrupts his story with irrelevant issues. These are entertainment forms all extinct today, but their residual traces can be found in Yeşilçam's narrative and stylistic devices.

Dubbing: a contested history

Mikhail Yampolsky, in his study of dubbing as taken up by Antonin Artaud and Jorge Borges, refers to a story by Isak Dinesen where the facial features of a child are flattened after he uncannily begins to sing with the voice of a 'possessive' female singer. Taking this as a metaphor for dubbing, Yampolsky argues that 'dubbing can be described as the intrusion of foreign acoustical matter into the body, causing deformities on the surface of the body that can be defined as the "events" of dubbing. "Events" in this case are the changes occurring on the visible surface.'⁸ Although Yampolsky is discussing the case of well-known French actors dubbing US films, he concludes in general that when a body borrows a voice there will be a price to pay. That is, the body is vulnerable to the operations of the voice which will force changes, the most drastic being that the body collapses into a surface. Fatih Ozguven's novel *Esrarengiz Bay Kartaloğlu/Mysterious Mr Eagleton* offers an experience of reading identical to that of dubbing a film. The text contains instructions for voicing passages, looped dialogues following one another, and speech seems to gain a life of its own, independent of the characters suffering the indeterminacies of their own reality. At a certain point, the text gives away the crux of the matter: the hero, Vecit Kartaloğlu, is on a sea voyage and chatting with a female traveller about a prewar US film which tells the story of a recently divorced couple. Kartaloğlu found the film bizarre, because it was dubbed 'with a most savage Mediterranean dialect' which did not match the female character. He observes

then anything that the story strove to impose was smashed to smithereens and vanished. It was not a game of desire, do you understand, hers was a genuine desire which did not fit into the plot. all the while I watched it, I kept saying if only she stopped

8 Mikhail Yampolsky, 'Voice
 devoured: Artaud and Borges on
 dubbing' trans. Larry P. Joseph
October no. 64 (Spring 1993)
 p. 62

being a clown For her voice was saying something else, she was torn between her story and her voice⁹

9 *Esrarengiz Bay Kartaloğlu/*
Mysterious Mr Eagleton (Istanbul
Can 1990) p 83 (translation
mine)

10 Thomas Elsaesser Tales of
sound and fury observations on
the family melodrama in Bill
Nichols (ed.) *Movies and
Methods* Volume II (Berkeley
CA: University of California Press
1985) p 173

Similarly, Thomas Elsaesser, in his classic essay on melodrama provides this assessment: 'dubbing makes the best picture visually flat and dramatically out of sync: it destroys the flow on which coherence of the illusionist spectacle is built'.¹⁰ In the following, I will investigate how Yeşilçam negotiates these perceived difficulties.

Many film scholars are surprised to learn that dubbing had not always been standard practice in Turkish Cinema. In the early 1930s Kemal Film, a pioneering film company, hired a German sound technician to build it a studio. In 1932 its contract director, Muhsin Ertuğrul, made the first commercial talking film, *Bir Millet Uyanıyor/A Nation Awakening*. However, a decade later the producers of *Derili Pınar/The Troubled Spring* (Faruk Kenç, 1943), who did not want to wait for the arrival of some equipment that had been sent to Germany for maintenance, started shooting without sound. Screenwriter Bulent Oran remembers.

Silent shooting is easier and more feasible. It saves time and thus cuts down the production costs. Also, it offers the possibility of casting good-looking actors with bad diction. In addition to that, the prompter saves the players from wasting their time by memorizing their lines. That is, to cut a long story short, it offered many advantages.¹¹

11 Yeşilçam nasıl doğdu, nasıl
büyüdü nasıl oldu ve yaşasın
yeni sinema/'How Yeşilçam was
born how it grew how it died
and long live new cinema' in
Suleyma Murat Dinçer (ed.) *Türk
Sineması Üzerine Düşünceler
/Thinking on Turkish Cinema*
(Ankara Doruk 1996), p 281

12 See Cimcoz's memories on the
early years of dubbing
*Sözlendirme anıları / Memories
of dubbing Yeni Sinema* nos
19/20 (June–July 1968)
pp 40–42

13 By imitation I refer to *taklid* the
traditional theatre actor's
impersonation of a person or to
be more precise a type

Until then the existing sound studios were used for dubbing foreign-language films. Interestingly, dubbing was already recognized as part of what made foreign films enjoyable. Among the first dubbing directors were Ferdi Tayfur, who 'gave his voice to' Laurel and Hardy and The Marx Brothers, his sister Adalet Cımcoz, who ran an art gallery, and Nazım Hikmet, an internationally renowned poet who had to flee to Moscow because of his Communist leanings.¹² Turkish audiences still have vivid memories of Tayfur's improvisations in the studio, playing not only with the characters' lines but also with their accents, creating alternative, and more familiar, identities for them than those originally conceived. To his Turkish fans, for example, Groucho Marx was known as Arşak Palabıyıkıyan, an Armenian name referring to his bushy moustache. So, in its early years, dubbing did not merely serve as translation from a foreign language into Turkish; it was also the means by which adaptations and imitations were assimilated, creating identifiable characters and plots for the audience.¹³

Obviously, conversion to post-dubbing cannot be explained solely by a studio's impatience over a faulty piece of machinery, rather it can be seen as an anticipation of the shape of things to come. The indigenous film business was given a premature spur, first by tax cuts, then by migration within Turkey from rural areas to big cities

Along with radio, cinema became the leading entertainment form in this period (television took over much later, in the 1970s), and by the early 1960s the growing demand for indigenous films caught producers off guard. The film industry made a number of hasty rearrangements in order to speed up production: flat lighting, fewer camera setups and more remakes (to save on screenwriting time), all of which gave way to a specific form of narration. Given the circumstances, it seems inevitable that Yeşilçam would have to convert to dubbing. It brought with it not only a degree of flexibility, but also a shorter production period, shifting the actors' load onto the sound studios.

There were only a few actors who dubbed themselves.¹⁴ Most were prevented from doing so by the unsuitability of their accent or diction, or by tight schedules. Instead, sound studios hired 'dubbing artists', mostly theatre actors. Dubbing was an extra job for which they were paid well, and a theatrical background meant they generally spoke distinctly and intelligibly. Each film was dubbed in three to five sessions, each lasting three hours.¹⁵ The film was divided into segments and the actors were scheduled accordingly, with the dubbers who were not voicing lead characters often taking on more than one lesser character each.¹⁶ Each segment was looped and played repeatedly while the actors studied the lip movements, if necessary made alterations to the dialogue, and then rehearsed the scene. When the dubbing director felt that they were ready, she/he gave a cue to start recording. During the recording, with the text in their hands, the actors gathered around the microphone and usually maintained the same distance from it regardless of how the players were positioned in relation to the camera. Thus the distance between onscreen actors and the camera and between dubbing actors and the microphone did not cohere: the former varied, while the latter usually remained unchanged; the point of audition was oblivious to both shooting scale and the positions of the actors onscreen.

This may not have been an altogether pleasant situation for the actors. In 1965 Cuneyt Arkin, at the beginning of a brilliant acting career, wrote that to rely too heavily on dubbing during the shooting ruined an actor's performance. He suggested that due to lack of rehearsal time or from carelessness, the actor would not be able to appropriate the dialogue for herself/himself and often feared that the lines would not be given in good time. However, she/he trusted that all these mistakes would be repaired in that magic place, the sound studio: 'The actor, then, trying to get rid of her/his line at once, rolls up the words and does not care to convey their meanings'.¹⁷ For example, we could envisage a scene in which two characters are having a conversation. Since the players would only be able to have a quick glance through the screenplay and would not know what they were supposed to say, they would need a prompt to read out their lines for them. The prompt – usually the scriptgirl – sometimes

14 Following Richard Dyer, who finds the usage of actress as degrading to female players, I use 'actor' and sometimes 'player' for both sexes.

15 Erman Şener gives a detailed account of dubbing process in his 'Sözlendirme sorunu'/'The problem of dubbing', *Yeni Sinema* nos. 19/20 (June–July 1968) pp. 36–7.

16 Although this was true generally for the dubbing of extras, sometimes they went so far as to dub the leads as well. Hayri Caner in his memoirs proudly reveals that in *Ağlayan Melek/The Weeping Angel* (Safa Önal 1970), a very talented dubbing artiste, Jeyan Mahfi Tozum dubbed both the heroine Turkan Şoray and her friend Oya Peri in the same scene. *Yeşilçam Filmleri/Yeşilçam Films* (İstanbul: Vizyon 1995) p. 12.

17 Türk sinemasında oyun ve oyunculuk/'Play and playing in Turkish cinema', *Sinema* 65 (August 1965) pp. 24–5.

had to hide behind a couch or under a table to avoid being caught on camera. She occupied a space within the diegesis of the film, yet was always invisible. For the actors onscreen it is the prompt who initiates and controls their speech: the first player repeats to the second player what she has just heard from the prompt. The second player does not listen to her but to the prompt, who is now reading out his lines. This means that on the sonic level, the body of the Yeşilçam screen actor is a waiting body; waiting and anxious to hear what is to come from a place other than that represented visually onscreen. The discrepancy between the visual and the aural is divisive in both its reception and its delivery of speech. The film actually represents two voices which come simultaneously from different sources – one from the player in the space of the profilmic event and the other from the prompt who, whilst present, is deliberately absented from the visual field. This is further complicated by the fact that during the screening the audience hears neither of the two, it receives the voices and sounds from the sound studio.

Yeşilçam is prone to other discontinuities and failures. Lipsynch, for example, may collapse at anytime; on many occasions the audience will see the actor opening her/his mouth with no voice to accompany it, and speech will be heard after the mouth is shut. Another technical failure is the distortion of the first syllable of words. Such an error may cause an exclamation required at a climactic moment (for example, 'Hayır! Olamaz!'/ 'No, that's impossible!') to be unintentionally hilarious ('N'ayır! N'olamaz!'/ 'No! N'at's n'impossible!'). Another more consistent discrepancy can be observed in the process of reverberation. As I have already mentioned, the reverberation or audible placing of the actors produced in the soundtrack does not mirror the space of the imagetrack in the way we expect today. An example would be the cliché of two lovers meeting on a hill with a view of the sea and the city of Istanbul: even when the bodies are clearly placed outdoors, 'their' voices come from an interior. Ambient sound is scarcely used – no wind blowing, no waves breaking, no birds chirping – music compensates for everything. If sound-effects were used, they were mostly produced in the studio; if there was time to search the archives for suitable sources, then stock material was used. From this perspective, the soundtrack of Yeşilçam appears extremely impoverished. Take, for instance, the opening scenes of *Surtuk/Streetwalker* (Ertem Eğilmez, 1970): we see Ekrem (Ekrem Bora), a tough owner of a chain of music halls, and his men in a car on their way to bust a night club. On the soundtrack we hear jazz music which is apparently non-diegetic. On reaching the club the men beat up a bodyguard who stands in their way and enter, pushing through a crowd dancing to the same music, which has now become diegetic. Aside from music, the soundtrack contains only footsteps



Indifferent bodies, activated
only by speech.
Sürtük/Streetwalker
(Ertem Eğilmez, 1970).

and the sounds of intermittent fighting between Ekrem's men and the guards. The sound-effects thus function only as 'images of sounds' and are not intended to produce a reality effect. A final significant discrepancy relates to singing, which also functions in a curious manner. This is especially important, for Yeşilçam as a genre is dominated by melodrama. Many of the films exploit singing both for its entertainment value and to enable a twist in the narrative. A common plot follows a poor female character who becomes a famous

Ferdi's body does not acknowledge Ekrem's presence until he is spoken to. *Sürtük/Streetwalker*.



¹⁸ It must be noted that this does not hold true for the cases in which an established singer plays the lead.

¹⁹ Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, p. 5 (emphasis in original)

singer. In *Hayatım Sana Feda/This Life Devoted to You* (Muzaffer Aslan, 1970) – a film which I will discuss in detail later – the star, Türkan Şoray, is dubbed by Adalet Cimcoz. However, when she begins to sing, we hear the voice of Lale Belkıs, another well-known actor and singer. To us the screen actor's body, commuting between voices, is possessed twice, for narrative (speech) and for non-narrative (musical performance) purposes.¹⁸

Michel Chion repeatedly stresses that sound is vococentric, that is 'the presence of a human voice structures the sonic space that contains it'.¹⁹ I want to argue that Yeşilçam may have taken this to its extreme. Speech in Yeşilçam, whilst cueing the flow of the action, can be seen to switch bodies 'on' and 'off'. In *Sürtük*, for example, Ekrem and Suzan, an aging singer in decline, go to a low-class night club. Suzan has a row with the singer, Naciye (Hülya Koçyiğit), whom she despises openly. To teach Suzan a lesson Ekrem decides to make Naciye a star, and the following day buys her new clothes and takes her to his house where Suzan is waiting for him. First we see Suzan from Ekrem's point of view, then the POV is dispossessed and Ekrem and Naciye enter from the right. The camera centres up to show Ekrem, Suzan, Naciye, the housemaid and the chauffeur. Failing to recognize Naciye in her new clothes, Suzan rises and starts walking across the frame, pauses briefly to fondle Ekrem's shoulder (a desperate attempt to signify possession), then stops by Naciye. Trying to control herself, she turns to Ekrem and asks: 'Who is this doll? A foreign artiste?' Ekrem replies 'Don't you recognize her? You called her a "streetwalker" last night.' The scene's frontality (with all the players in line facing the camera), establishes a curious

hierarchy: the main characters are in the centre and the rest in the periphery. They stand motionless and seem unaffected by what is happening around them until they begin to speak. Even the object of their verbal exchange, Naciye, awaits her turn to be activated. Later, Ekrem seeks someone to teach Naciye how to sing. He finds Ferdi (Goksel Arsoy), a piano player working in one of his music halls, and sends for him. We see Ferdi waiting in Ekrem's study, sitting in an armchair looking downwards. Ekrem appears at the door behind where he is sitting, enters the room, steps towards Ferdi and taps him on the shoulder, saying 'Hello, welcome!' It is only at this point that Ferdi acknowledges the presence of Ekrem. His body can now be activated in Ekrem's direction and thus inserted into the flow of the scene.²⁰

²⁰ Since the main characters do the most of the talking and they are more likely to be shown in two-shots than in crowded ones this observation is more accurate with minor characters

Rick Altman suggests how the image – or, to be more precise, the body – may serve as an alibi for the voice onscreen. He argues that sound in cinema is like a ventriloquist who 'uses' the body, that is, manipulating it as if it were a puppet. Trying to conceal the fact that the voice comes from the loudspeakers placed behind the screen, the players move their lips and the audience is led to – and wants to – believe that its source is someone within the diegesis of the film.²¹ Thus, an impression of reality is maintained and the audience is protected from the uncanny effect of the voice coming from a non-human source (the speakers). Altman's analogy may be extended further: the practice of dubbing as described above suggests that in *Yeşilçam*, it may appear as if all the puppets are 'spoken' by the same ventriloquist. This is very much in accordance with the traditional shadow play, *Karagöz*, which was dethroned by cinema. The *Karagoz* master (*hayat*) speaks through the mouths of all the types, each with a different accent, and even produces the musical score as well as the sound effects (mostly by the help of a *def*, a kind of tambourine with cymbals). What are the implications of this?

²¹ Rick Altman, 'Moving lips: cinema as ventriloquism', *Yale French Studies* no. 60 (1980) pp. 76–8

In a discussion of what happened to the body with the coming of sound, Stephen Heath draws on the observation by Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin that when the cinema began to speak, every actor began to speak the same thing. He argues:

Evidently there is a strong homogenization and idealization of the silent cinema here that needs resisting and analyzing, but the point remains valid that the sound cinema is the development of a powerful standard of the body and of the voice as hold of the body in image. . . . In the silent cinema, the body is always pulling towards an emphasis, an exaggeration, a burlesque (the term of an intractable existence), in the sound cinema, the body is smoothed out, given over to that contract of thought described by Godard-Gorin, with the voice as the medium, the expression, of a homogenous thinking subject – actor and spectator – of film.²²

²² Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema* (London: Macmillan 1985) p. 191

Although Heath is writing of sound cinema in general, his

observations are insightful. Does Yeşilçam allow for or produce a thinking subject? Do the actors all speak the same thing? I would argue that, as far as the dubbing described above is concerned, they do not speak at all. Their bodies are given over not to homogenous thinking subjects but to Logos expressing itself through voices that were only slackly attached to bodies. Hence Yeşilçam is like the shadow-play master whose voice remains the same by way of the differences it produces. It might well be suggested that the voice *in* Yeşilçam is the voice *of* Yeşilçam: the utterances are instances of Logos which dictates its moral universe and orchestrates the unfolding narrative. An analysis of the scripts may confirm this. Onat Kutlar, in his criticism of Yeşilçam screenplays, argues that speech is, in effect, mostly redundant, for it simply describes the action, and the language itself is not colloquial, ultimately producing a kind of cinema which is not 'alive'.²³ Thus an actor in Yeşilçam, I maintain, is 'be-spoken'. This is why almost all of the dialogue, instead of functioning as the indices of a character's interior psychological situation, transform all the characters into a set of statements. Does this therefore suggest that speech in these instances takes more or less the form of a voiceover? For although bodies are seemingly assigned to speech, the soundtrack, and particularly the sound of the voice, fails to conceal the fact that it (and thus Logos) simply uses bodies as a vehicle for its mediation. The voice is thus disembodied, and this disembodied voice creates/comes from a theocentric space. In an endnote to her article on the articulation of body and sound in cinema, Mary Ann Doane points to these theological implications of the disembodied voice:

Two kinds of 'voices without bodies' immediately suggest themselves – one theological the other scientific (two poles which, it might be added, are not ideologically unrelated): (1) the voice of God incarnated in the Word; (2) the artificial voice of a computer. Neither seems to be capable of representation outside a certain anthropomorphism, however. God is pictured, in fact, as having a quite specific body – that of a male patriarchal figure.²⁴

Whilst western culture allows for a visual representation of God, endowing Him with a male, patriarchal body, the voiceover nonetheless gains its theological status thanks to its disembodiment. Leaving aside the ambiguity that arises from the possibilities of representing God, I want to reiterate with Doane that in the classical cinema the use of voiceover can reveal the relationship between sexual difference and its theological implications.

Doane's arguments, however, are related to a specific cultural heritage and belief system. In contrast, Yeşilçam originates from a very different conception of reality and the relationship between various domains of Being. Islam, not unlike some eastern doctrines such as Tibetan Buddhism and Taoism, devised a conception of

²³ Onat Kutlar 'Türk sinemasında konuşmalar üzerine bazı aykırı notlar' / 'Counter arguments on speech in Turkish cinema' *Yeni Sinema*, no. 9 (August 1967) pp. 17–18.

²⁴ Mary Ann Doane 'The voice in the cinema: articulation of body and space' in Phil Rosen (ed.) *Narrative Apparatus and Ideology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) p. 347. fn. 2.

Being – Allah – which escapes any kind of figurative representation, let alone anthropomorphism. If we leave aside the symbolism of esoteric teachings (such as Sufism) which can mostly be traced in literary texts, it is clear that personification, and therefore spatio-temporalization, of Allah is strictly avoided. Seyyid Hussein Nasr argues:

Islamic aniconism, which removes the possibility of the concretization of the Divine Presence (*hudur*) in an icon or image, is a powerful factor in intensifying the spiritual significance of the void in the Muslim mind ... God and His revelation are not identified with any particular place, time or object. Hence His Presence is ubiquitous. He is everywhere, in whichever direction one turns, as the Quranic verse, 'Whithersoever ye turn, there is the face of God' (II, 115), affirms.²⁵

25 Seyyid Hussein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987) p. 187.

Obviously, all this is not to say that space-time is devoid of divinity, for everything serves as a sign-vehicle of the Divine. The dichotomy of the embodied voice/disembodied voice, in so far as it reserves a specific place for God as the disembodied voice or Logos, is based on Christian theology which, as Doane argues, eventually issued a patriarchal figure, whereas Islam strictly rejects attributing a body to Allah. Hence in Islam Logos may penetrate all bodies. I think this may provide us with clues as to how voiceover functions differently in Yeşilçam, having diffused the 'Divine Presence' throughout the soundtrack, voiceover proper and voiceover as travesty of dialogue eventually blur the border between what we may perceive as diegetic and nondiegetic, thus making it impossible to identify the male voice alone with the attributes of the apparatus.

Blind men 'seeing' the voice

The play between the voice and the body may be still more complicated, however. The voice may be seen to establish a character, but then transcend it by restoring the distance between audience and character onscreen. This may be understood through 'loss of sight', an often ridiculed theme which is very common in Turkish melodrama. I will argue that this subgenre may serve as an object-lesson for my purposes in this essay.

In his essay on Indian melodrama, a genre which heavily influenced Turkish cinema, Ravi Vasudevan argues that the man's loss of sight connotes his indifference to the woman's desire.²⁶ Indeed, in *Aşk Mabudesi/Goddess of Love* (Nejat Saydam, 1969), for example, former lovers Leyla (Turkan Şoray) and Ekrem (Cuneyt Arkın) encounter each other in a music hall. Leyla does not know that Ekrem has had an accident and has lost his sight. Ekrem shivers, and when his companion asks him what happened he replies that he

26 Ravi Vasudevan, 'Melodramatic mode and the commercial Hindi cinema: notes on film history narrative and performance in the 1950s', *Screen* vol. 30 no. 3 (1989) p. 36.

felt the presence of someone he knew. Leyla looks at him but he does not return her gaze. Her heart broken, she leaves. Thus it may be suggested that his loss of sight makes him indifferent to, and unaware of, her desire. However, the theme of the blind man in Turkish cinema requires a broader scope that enables a discussion of body–voice split. The incidents and coincidences – blindness being the most prominent – devised by Yeşilçam are carefully planned and controlled by the logic which also governs the construction of cinematic bodies. Sightlessness provides clues about the psychic mechanisms at work in Yeşilçam's approach to voice and body. When the characters are or become blind, desire is not only made possible but also mediated by the voice which is disembodied not for the audience but for the character in the diegesis of the film. This involves an investment in the diegetic/character and nondiegetic/audience (op)positions.

Both men and women may be subject to a deprivation of this kind, but economy of sexual difference dictates a specific plot for each sex. In *Feride* (Metin Erksan, 1971),²⁷ *Aşk Mabudesi* and *Adını Anmayacağım/I Shan't Recall Your Name* (Orhan Elmas, 1971), the man, having split up with his woman, loses his sight. For instance, *Feride* tells the story of Kemal (Engin Çağlar) who sees his wife, Feride (Emel Sayın), in the arms of another man and thinks he is dishonoured. In fact, the man has set them up, but no matter how hard Feride tries to explain the situation, Kemal will not listen and sends her away in disgrace. Left in the house with a collaborator in the deception, Furuzan (Lale Belkıs, the archetypal wicked blonde), Kemal proceeds to lose all his money in a desperate card game. When Furuzan realizes that she will not now be able to enjoy his wealth she walks out. Then Kemal loses his sight as a result of heavy drinking. He retires to a modest house and lives in isolation, but one day he meets, in a nearby park, a little girl whose charm returns the joy of life to him. She is, of course, his daughter by Feride, who is now a famous singer. Feride comes to his house in search of the child and they meet again. She manages to overcome the shock of seeing him and easily convinces Kemal, who shows his horror and disgust upon hearing her voice, that she is not Feride but someone else.²⁸ She begins to visit him regularly and they start an 'innocent' affair which lasts until Kemal regains his sight thanks to a successful operation. Feride disappears again but, in the end, the child reunites them.

Adını Anmayacağım follows the same plot with a slight variation. Gul (Hulya Koçyiğit) returns home as a nurse to look after Engin (Cuneyt Arkın). Neither he nor their grown-up daughter, Oya, recognize her. Engin falls in love with Gul and decides to have the operation to cure his blindness ('I want to look at you until I am gratified').²⁹ Just as Gul is about to disappear out of the fear that Engin would expel her again if he saw her, she learns that the man

27 For a detailed analysis of *Feride* see Elif Rongen Kaynakçı, *Feride* a Yeşilçam melodrama: Turkish popular cinema and the construction of cultural identity, unpublished MA thesis, University of Amsterdam, 1997.

28 In such encounters the men recover from the shock and readily believe that they have mistaken the voice for the voice of the women they had sent away.

29 While the sense of sight can always be regained, either the character cannot afford the operation or she/he simply does not wish to see again.

who destroyed her marriage is now after their daughter. Indeed the man drugs Oya and attempts to rape her. Gul follows them and saves Oya but has to kill the man. In court she does not even defend herself but, having learned that she is sacrificing her life for the honour of the family, Engin appears as a lawyer and 'proclaims' the truth. When he tells the judge and the audience the sad story of Gul, their sympathy stands in for the verdict and the narrative jumps to her immediate release and the reunion of the family. It is significant here that the space of the Law is where all misunderstanding and conflict are resolved. As already discussed, *Aşk Mabudesi* deviates from this plot but still conforms to the same structure. Ekrem and Leyla fall in love and decide to marry. However, a jealous ex-fiancee convinces Leyla that she has caused the suicide of Ekrem's brother. She unwillingly leaves Ekrem on the pretext of her desire for a singing career. When Ekrem learns that she actually loves him, he rushes to her home but crashes his car on the way. He loses his sight but pride prevents him from letting her know this. They run into each other on a few occasions, but since Leyla does not know that he is blind she thinks Ekrem is refusing to acknowledge her presence/appearance and thus her desire. In the end, however, she learns the truth and they are reunited.

All three plots position the woman as the victim of a third party. The male protagonist's rejection of the woman is repayed by a split in his perception of the world. The disappearance of the woman coincides with the man's loss of sight and sometimes his property, thus exposing castration as a necessary ordeal. He is blinded by what he has seen (because he has believed in the truth of what he apparently 'sees') and thus fails to 'see' what the woman is really saying. The voice attached to the female body is now a waste of words and the body is established as the site which negates the desire of the man and the family that legitimates his desire. Anything that her body will now emit, vocally such as explanations and excuses, or physically such as another body (a baby), is discarded as waste, if not abject. Only then may the woman return as the voice. Her voice is thus worth listening to only when it is detached from its 'material' source, that is, her body. The proximity of the protagonists may vary: in *Feride* and *Adını Anmayacağım* they are within each other's reach, whereas in *Aşk Mabudesi*, Ekrem can hear Leyla's singing only via loud speakers placed outside the music hall. In different contexts the woman's voice represents both closure and disclosure, revealing an ambivalent attitude towards the female voice. So while Ekrem can listen to Leyla singing, which stands in for her presence, Engin cannot endure Gul's voice coming from the radio: agitated, he yells to have it turned off. Yet both types of reaction arguably derive from the same psychic structure: the mother's voice is substituted for the umbilical cord, but at the same time it evokes the painful memory of rupture.³⁰

³⁰ For an account of this see Chion, *The Voice in Cinema* pp. 61–2.

The audience's identification with the male character is understood in narrative terms as the sharing of the same information about a given situation. At the moment of crisis this position shifts to one of empathy, the audience knows more than the character does, and does not approve of his attitude, yet will still side with him. While the audience is almost always given an omniscient view, the pathos of melodrama lies in the flaws in the distribution of information. Empathy returns to a position of identification only when the male character begins to 'see', which also returns the voice to the body of the female character. This is why the audience feels so frustrated when the character cannot see what it sees – that the voice which is divine to the male character is in fact coming from the body he condemned as disgraceful.

Blind women 'hearing' the sight

Women lose their sight, too. They are either already blind when the film opens (*Uç Arkadaş/Three Comrades* [Memduh Ün, 1958, 1971], *Serseri/The Tramp* [Ö. Nuri Ergün, 1959]) or lose their sight very early on (*Hayatım Sana Feda*)³¹. Therefore, unlike the men who pay for their misunderstandings, women's loss coincides only with the initial narrative thrust. And while men begin to see in the finale, women's acquisition of sight, instead of concluding the film, gives the narrative a final push, the beloved one is still to be attained. The woman has to choose the right man from several who claim the same identity, and has to return the male voice, which is the source of her desire, to the originary body. The emblematic film here is *Uç Arkadaş*. It features Muhterem Nur as a blind girl who earns a living by selling safety pins on the street. Three musicians, all male, seeing that she is vulnerable to the dangers of the big city, take her to their ramshackle house. Here they construct a make-believe world for her, convincing her that she is living with successful musicians in a luxurious villa. They find the money necessary for an operation to cure her blindness, but the moment she regains her sight they disappear. She goes on to become a famous singer and starts to search for them. On finding the house where they used to live, she realizes she had become a part of, and target for, their fiction. Even the portrait which they had told her was of an aristocratic ancestor turns out to be a kitsch painting of an ape. In the end she finds them by following the distant sound of their voices.

Hayatım Sana Feda, meanwhile, tells the story of Zeynep (Turkan Şoray), who loses her sight in a car accident. Harun (Cuneyt Arkın), who is responsible for the accident, tries to help Zeynep financially only to find that she is too proud to accept such an offer and is full of hatred for the man who caused her loss of sight. Zeynep finds a job as a singer in a music hall, whose owner agrees to employ her

31 Which confirms Freud's castration scenario

on the condition that the audience must not realize that she is blind. In order for her to act as if she could see, his authorial voice maps the space of her performance, with the microphone (the 'phallus') in the centre 'First find the microphone', he instructs, 'it will be your guide on the stage. Then five steps to the right and then five to the left That is all.' Thus Zeynep's body becomes a spectacle for the audience in reference to the microphone which mediates her voice and serves as her anchor on stage. But Zeynep's desire will jeopardize this illusion. Harun introduces himself as a blind musician and soon they fall in love. One night, after she has sung one of Harun's songs, her awareness of his presence in the audience endangers the power of the microphone (as phallus), and she fails to locate it and loses her balance. Surprisingly, Zeynep's desire is not punished and the accident does not have serious consequences. Harun provides the money for an operation and, once Zeynep can see, he disappears and then reappears in the guise of a music tycoon, Kemal, who is willing to make her a star. Kemal proposes to her and she accepts, but this fails to make him happy. Kemal feels betrayed and swears to take revenge on behalf of his 'true' self, Harun. But the day before their marriage, Zeynep, while singing, has a vision of Harun (whose face is obscured) and realizes that she is still in love with him. She confesses to Kemal that she cannot marry him, upon which he reveals his true identity.

Another film, *Serseri* runs against this formula and offers a radically different positioning of the woman. Kazım (Sadri Alışık), a poor fisherman, finds a homeless blind girl, Zeynep (Sema Özcan), on the beach where he keeps his boat. He takes her to his cabin and begins to look after her. In this case it is Zeynep who offers Kazım a reading of his world which she cannot see. 'My body has become all eyes', she says, 'I can see with my everything except my eyes'. Kazım begins to see things from her angle ('It is me who has been blind until now'), and having fallen in love with her decides to try everything possible to help her regain her sight. He steals money for an operation and when in hospital the bandage is removed from Zeynep's eyes, the camera turns away from her and looks out of the window to show the police arresting Kazım. He asks a close friend to impersonate him and marry her, but the 'embodiment' of Kazım's voice fails to convince Zeynep. 'You are not him', she protests, 'I saw him with my ears'. She visits him in the jail, but Kazım rejects her saying he is not the Kazım that she knew. The guard looking over Kazım's shoulder – as representative of the Law – intervenes 'There is no Kazım here but you'.

Since the voice is always the medium of truth – although it reserves a right to fiction – it belongs to a higher order in the hierarchy of Being. However, as I have tried to demonstrate, this does not mean

that Yeşilçam aims to establish the Cartesian body–soul duality. In connection with this, a Sufi source gives an eloquent illustration of a change in the body of the prophet Joseph, Jacob’s eleventh son. Having shed all his worldly desires and personal attributes, the appearance of Joseph undergoes a radical transformation. ‘His body is not wrapped around flesh but Divine Love, thus his skin becomes transparent, when he eats, one can see the colour of the food going down his throat, and when he drinks it is possible to see the flow of the drink’. Curiously, the text does not stop there: ‘Looking at the soles of his feet, one can see his face’³² I cannot give an exhaustive account of all the implications of this story. I must be content with saying that this, obviously, does not suggest a rejection of the body in favour of spirituality, that is, a split between ‘body’ and ‘soul’. On the contrary, Divine Love penetrates Joseph’s body, releasing its parts from the hierarchy (head/feet, heaven/earth) into which they were initially inscribed. By the same token, by giving the body to the service of Logos and frequently by denying the characters the ‘look’, and therefore the sight of the body (particularly the body of the other), Yeşilçam appears to have separated the two domains. Ultimately, however, the body–soul duality is resolved, since it is made clear that there has to be a body in the first place, for it is the body which makes the mediation of voice, and thus truth, possible.

I would like to thank Lewis Keir Johnson and Zafer Aracagök for their helpful comments and suggestions.

³² Zeynep Sayın ‘Batı da ve doğu da beden’in temsîlînde haysiyet ve zillet II / Integrity and vileness in the representation of body in the West and in the East’ *Defter* no. 40 (Summer 2000) p. 221.

Virtual cities: film and the urban mapping of virtual space

ROSE MARIE SAN JUAN and GERALDINE PRATT

It may even be, after all, that there is something irreducible and non-transferrable, necessary but not quite sufficient, about the city's public street and square for the realization of a meaningful democratic citizenship. If we support the latter, we may have to do much more to defend the former.¹

- 1 James Holston and Arjun Appadurai 'Cities and citizenship' *Public Culture* vol 8 no 2 (1996) p. 202
- 2 On film's relation to the city, see David B. Clarke (ed.) *The Cinematic City* (London: Routledge, 1997) pp. 3–10 and from the same collection Frank Krutnik 'Something more than night: tales of the noir city' pp. 83–109 and Anthony Easthope 'Cinecities in the sixties' pp. 129–39 see also Giuliana Bruno *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993)

Cinema and cyberspace are bound together in ways that recall the symbiotic relationship between cinema and the city.² In its initial manipulation of the effects of dislocation and disembodiment, cinema both celebrated and problematized modern urban life. Some of the most powerful critiques of the 'dehumanization' of people in the modern urban environment emerged in filmic representations that exposed the heavy toll of technology and its demeaning labour practices. Yet the self-awareness that informs these critiques was produced through forms of vision that the technology of film itself brought to the modern city. Starting in 1929 with Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, these forms of vision revealed not only the unpredictable potential within modern urban life but also the ways that technology itself constructed this potential.

If film proved a powerful medium for the contradictory representations of the city and even for the very configuration of urban modernity, it has now taken on the task of envisioning the possibilities of new technologies. Exhilarating cyberspace fantasies have appeared in the cinema, exploring the internet in *Hackers* (Iain Softley, 1995) and the virtual space of *The Matrix* (The Wachowski Brothers, 1999). As a kind of simulacrum and not simply a

3 On the cinema as a kind of virtual space see Clarke (ed.) *The Cinematic City* p. 9

4 Slavoj Žižek 'Cyberspace or the unbearable closure of being', in Janet Bergstrom (ed.) *Endless Night Cinema and Psychoanalysis, Parallel Histories* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999) pp. 96–125. Žižek retains the importance of the physical body within a changing relation to technology, which is a central point of our argument.

5 Theodore Roszak *The Cult of Information* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994) p. 185. See S. Graham and A. Aunig 'Virtual cities: social polarization and the crisis in urban public space', *Journal of Urban Technology* vol. 4 (1997) pp. 19–52 for a review of utopic renderings of computer network technology as a new public sphere (esp. pp. 32–4). On the coffee house as an utopic space of debate see Alexandra Halasz *The Marketplace of Print: Pamphlets and the Public Sphere in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

representation of electronic space or bodily experience, film offers viewers the very opportunities of virtual space, often before they can be actualized in virtual space.³ While there are crucial differences, cinema and cyberspace produce comparable effects of dislocation and disembodiment, arguably privileging the visual as a way to simulate proximity without physical presence, and thus transforming the relationship between subject and object of viewing in particular ways. In a recent article, Slavoj Žižek argues that cyberspace offers the ultimate cinema screen, which, as the materialization of a dislocated fantasmatic universe, cannot be linked to an external reality.⁴ We would argue, however, that the critical legacy that bound cinema to the city has reappeared in cinema's organization of technology's future parameters. Recent films focus on the charged intersection between the abstracted spaces of the internet and contradictions of the urban, not only raising fantastic possibilities but also reasserting actual constraints. Cinematic cyberspace has emerged not as an entirely new space but as a substitute for specific kinds of urban space. The internet space of *Hackers*, for example, is envisioned in relation to the modernist utopic city, while the virtual world of *The Matrix* is but a thin skin that constantly threatens to rupture and reveal the urban ruins of an exhausted postmodern dystopia.

In negotiating between appropriation and domination within cyberspace, cinema has set its sights squarely on the body. Indeed, recent films recognize that the space of the internet is now filled with the kinds of utopic projections on the body that once nourished conceptions of the modern city. Focusing primarily around the complicated relationship of bodies to social space, the internet is where notions of the individual, of community and of the public sphere are increasingly relocated and refashioned. If once opportunities for the individual and desires for equitable sociability were envisioned in relation to the reorganization of actual urban public space, now it is the abstract spaces of communication networks and the physical simulacrum of computer screens that seem to hold these unfulfilled promises. Theodore Roszak, for instance, makes direct links between electronic space and a utopic public sphere when he argues that 'the coffee houses of eighteenth-century London, the cafes of nineteenth-century Paris were rather like this: a gathering place for every taste and topic'.⁵ The internet as a site that harks back to a traditional space of freedom and political possibilities has even entered into legislation of individual rights. When, on 26 June 1997, the US Supreme Court struck down two provisions of the 1996 Communications Decency Act which aimed to regulate the internet, Justice Stevens wrote:

Through the use of chat rooms, any person with a phone line can become a town crier with a voice that resonates farther than it

6 Graham Fraser 'Top US court defends internet freedom' *Globe and Mail* 27 June 1997, p. A8

7 On the transcendence of bodily limits through new technologies, see Ken Hillis 'A geography of the eye: the technologies of virtual reality' in Rob Shields (ed.) *Cultures of Internet: Visual Spaces, Real Histories, Living Bodies* (London: Sage, 1996), pp. 70–98; also Allucquere Rosanne Stone 'Will the real body please stand up? Boundary stories about virtual cultures' in Michael Benedikt (ed.) *Cyberspace: First Steps* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 81–118.

8 On technology and gender see Lynn Cherny and Elizabeth Reba Weise (eds) *Wired Women: Gender and New Realities in Cyberspace* (Seattle, WA: Seale Press, 1996), pp. 125–46; Jennifer Terry and Melodie Calvert (eds) *Processed Lives: Technology in Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 1977), pp. 99–124.

could from any soapbox. Through the use of Web pages, mail explorers and newsgroups, the same individual can become a pamphleteer. As the District Court found, 'the content on the Internet is as diverse as human thought'.⁶

The internet as an alternative space in which to transcend the constraints of physical bodies in space has a particularly strong hold on the imagination and is frequently articulated in the media.⁷ In popular films, cyberspace is often imagined as resolving social difference through its erasure, a notion articulated with particular clarity in the film *Disclosure* (Barry Levinson, 1994), in which the protagonist, an employee of a computer manufacturing firm, states: 'What we are selling is freedom. We offer through technology what religion and revolution have promised but never delivered: freedom from the physical body, freedom from race and gender, from nationality and personality, from place and time. Communicating by cellular phone, and hand-held computer, PDA and built-in fax modems, we can relate to each other as pure consciousness.'

But what are we to make of these claims when they are ensconced in a film that speaks to a profound disquiet about identity politics and the presence of particular bodies (those of women) in the workplace?⁸ The film opens with the appointment of Meredith Johnson as vice-president for advanced operations and planning in a computer manufacturing firm, an explicit attempt on the part of the chief executive to help women break through 'the glass ceiling' (The paternalism is direct – he does this in memory of his daughter). And Johnson proves to be fully embodied in a scheming, destructive, muscular, aggressive sexuality. She first attempts to seduce and then falsely charges Tom Sanders, a production manager, with sexual harassment. It is Sanders's world that is at stake here; even his secretary, whom he assesses to be a friend and ally, testifies in legal proceedings about her discomfort with his behaviour towards her (for example, patting her behind and massaging her shoulders). The resolution comes only when the chief executive fires Meredith and abandons his efforts of affirmative action by deciding, instead, to appoint 'the best person for the job', who happens to be a post-menopausal, desexualized, responsible mother, and who has already helped Tom to save his job through her maternalism. Thus within a very thin veneer of progressiveness, the film articulates a sense of male confusion and vulnerability, about bodies and sexualities in the workplace, of a world where neck massages reappear as evidence of sexual harassment. It articulates a yearning for a space beyond the messiness and complexities of sexual politics: the internet is represented as such a space.

We are led to ask, in whose interests does this representation operate? Who yearns for such a space beyond bodies and

materialized differences? Henri Lefebvre's conception of changes in the production of space is useful here for it leads us to consider how current utopic schemes of cyberspace harbour within them the contradictions and conflicts inherent in established notions of urban space.⁹ Indeed, homogeneity through the abstraction of bodies and difference was once at the centre of conceptualizations of the modernist city, conceptualizations that could not suppress their relationship to urban fears and phobias, nor entirely erase urban space's complex and untidy social relationships.¹⁰ It is this relationship between a universalist utopia and the conflicts and contradictions of urban space that is called up by one of the most persistent metaphors of cyberspace, namely the image of the so-called Vitruvian Man.¹¹ In Leonardo da Vinci's geometrical codification of masculinity, the body is splayed out yet contained within the geometric abstractions of the circle and square. William Mitchell, in his book *City of Bits*, is alert to the way that the image of the Vitruvian Man interlinks the urban and cyberspace in films such as *Lawnmower Man* (Brett Leonard, 1992), and argues that the use of this image within virtual reality implies a new kind of city, one demanded by fragmented subjectivity.¹² We disagree with this assessment. In the sixteenth century, the image of Vitruvian Man, in which the male body and a mathematical system of proportion are conflated, was crucial to the concept of the ideal city as a site of perfect proportion and social order, enabling, but not interfering with, human subjectivity.¹³ Its use in filmic configurations of cyberspace and virtual reality is no less universalist in its claims, nor any less insistent in securing an individual masculine sexuality through clear definition of its 'others', be it the urban 'crowd', the evil of a rampant government or, most overtly, the impotent female body. As E. Ann Kaplan wryly notes:

Humans will carry with them into cyberspace formations ongoing now. Even writers' imaginings in science fiction cannot avoid repeating well-worn female stereotypes (see, for instance, Brett Leonard's *Lawnmower Man*).¹⁴

We turn again to Lefebvre's work to consider the implications of such abstracted bodiless representations. Lefebvre is deeply suspicious of the abstractions of space that have come to dominate in the twentieth century:

Formal and quantitative, [abstract space] erases distinctions, as much those which derive from nature and (historical) time as those which originate in the body (age, sex, ethnicity).¹⁵

Abstract space involves a reduction of social space to two dimensions ('a "plan", a blank sheet of paper, something drawn on that paper, a map or any kind of graphic representation and

9 Henri Lefebvre *The Production of Space* trans Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) pp. 46–7

10 Anthony Vidler 'Bodies in space/subjects in the city: psychopathologies of modern urbanism' *Differences: a Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* vol. 5, no. 3 (1993) pp. 31–51 esp. pp. 36–7

11 Some of the films that use the image of the Vitruvian man include *Hackers* (Iain Softley, 1995), *Virtuosity* (Brett Leonard, 1995), *The Lawnmower Man* (Brett Leonard, 1992) and *Gattaca* (Andrew Niccol, 1997)

12 William J. Mitchell *City of Bits: Space, Place and the Infobahn* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 1995), pp. 26–7

13 On the Renaissance implications of the Vitruvian Man, see Jay A. Levenson (ed.) *Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, exhibition catalogue (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 276–7

14 E. Ann Kaplan *Looking for the Other* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997) p. 293

15 Lefebvre *The Production of Space* p. 49

projection'),¹⁶ and a privileging of the visual over other sensory experience:

By the time this process is complete, space has no social existence independently of an intense, aggressive and repressive visualisation. It is thus – not symbolically but in fact – a purely visual space. The rise of the visual realm entails a series of substitutions and displacements by means of which it overwhelms the whole body and usurps its role.¹⁷

Lefebvre's analysis of abstract space leads us to question recent arguments for the pleasures of bodiless, post-identity cyberspace, and to consider the social relationships of domination (class, gender, and so on) that are veiled within and lived through it. As Lefebvre notes 'Abstract space *is not* homogeneous; it simply *has* homogeneity as its goal, its orientation, its "lens"'. And indeed it renders homogeneous' (emphasis in original)¹⁸ But this homogeneity is an effect that both builds on and conceals social differences. Abstract space relies upon and reproduces class differences, and is also phallic in so far as it symbolizes and enacts masculine violence and displaces the phallus outside the body and into vertical space. It involves an aggressive fragmentation of the body ('the body itself is pulverized')¹⁹ and localization of desire. The female body is spectacularized as advertising image and object of consumer desire. The male body is 'doubly castrated' as the phallus is isolated and projected outside the body into vertical space, and simultaneously subjected to the surveillant gaze.

Abstract space does, however, harbour contradictions; some that are new and some that emerge from old contradictions 'thrown up by historical time'.²⁰ According to Lefebvre, these contradictions have the potential of producing a new type of space that accentuates difference (differential space). Two sites in particular produce differences: the body and the urban. Of the body, Lefebvre writes 'The enigma of the body . . . is its ability . . . to produce differences "unconsciously" out of repetitions',²¹ and, of the urban: 'There is nothing more contradictory than urbanness'²² The city can be the means of absorbing difference, for example through residential segregation, in which people of different economic classes are separated in their everyday lives, or through the spectacularization of consumer fantasy. But the city, as an uncontrollable arena of innovation, new desires, new identities and new political practices, can also expose difference

How does 'the urban' operate as a disruptive force in relation to recent film representations of electronic space? It so happens that various films released in 1995 (*The Net* [Irwin Winkler], *Hackers*, *Virtuosity* [Brett Leonard] and *Strange Days* [Kathryn Bigelow]) explore the relationship between the space of the city and computer technology, which jointly becomes the space of fantasy and anxiety

This represents a considerable departure from earlier films that address computer technology and tend to locate the computer and its possibilities within the space of the private home and the emotional and physical intimacy of the body. In *Demon Seed* (Donald Cammell, 1972), for example, fear of technology is expressed through the literal impregnation of the female body by a computer, within the space of the home. *Secret Access* (Francesco Maselli, 1988) takes place almost entirely within the space of the apartment, and the computer is the medium for gaining access to a lover's secrets and identity, a quest for a level of intimate knowledge impossible in 'real life'.

If these films resonate with fears around the blurring of the boundaries between machinery and humans – or, to put it another way, between subjects and objects – films of the 1990s were prepared to entertain this blurring. This shift, in which subjectivity is no longer separable from that which produces it, has been located within the city, which also serves to challenge any sense of an autonomous coherent identity.²³ These films locate electronic space within a conflicting range of relationships accommodated within representations of the city. Such contradictions in turn introduce new pressures on how electronic space itself is represented. By holding electronic space in close tension with the space of the city, new desires and identities are addressed. In this way, as Lefebvre's argument suggests, the films introduce the potential to reveal contradictions within their abstractions.

But the new technology, rather than simply transferring existing relationships, actually reworks these and introduces new possibilities. For this reason, one might bring into question some of the assumptions inherent in Lefebvre's analysis of abstract space. Popular films, taking up diverse genres and political perspectives, may work in different ways with the city and electronic space, but they all demonstrate the insufficiency of writing about the diminishment of desire and sexual experience in the abstract space of computerized technology. As Foucault has argued, the pleasures of surveillance, discipline and confession are diffuse and circuitous, spiralling between the one who watches and is watched, disciplines and is disciplined, confesses and receives the confession.²⁴ Electronic space is figured in relation to fantasies of the urban, but film, working with different urban imaginaries and different relationships between the body and electronic space, opens an unexpected range of possibilities. The three films that are considered in this essay work with diverse urban imaginaries and ultimately offer viewers an electronic space in which opportunities, desires and entrapments are always conjoined, but in different ways.

23 Elisabeth Mahoney *The people in parenthesis space under pressure in the post-modern city* in Clarke (ed.), *The Cinematic City* pp 168–70

24 Michel Foucault *The History of Sexuality* Volume I trans R Hurley (New York: Vintage Books 1990)

More than any other film of recent years, Winkler's *The Net* addresses the new technology in relation to a well-established concept of the liberal city, the site for unleashing the individual's potential, now refocused on the promise that such a city holds for women. We are using the term 'liberal city' to describe a vision of the city that appears to celebrate urban diversity but holds difference in check through clear divisions of space and subjectivities. These subjectivities must remain in place to maintain any kind of coherence or autonomy. The domestic, private realm is such a space, and as a repository and safeguard of individual freedoms, traditions and interests enables the public sphere of collective, disinterested discourse. In *The Net*, the promises and dangers of electronic space are played out in relation to a city sharply divided between the public sphere and the domestic realm. One can read into this liberal vision of the city a fascination with the urban as a site of individual freedom and escape from the constraints of the collective, but even more evident is the fear of the effects that the public realm and urban modernity might have on private life;²⁵ Louis Wirth's famous reworking of Simmel's fears of the domination of technique and the incorporation of the fragmentary external world into our internal life, manifested in the figure of the blase, uprooted urban dweller, can be read in this light.²⁶

25 An interesting parallel is offered by Sharon Marcus. Placing Rosemary's Baby. *Differences: a Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* vol 5 no 3 (1993) pp 121–53.

26 On Simmel. David Frisby. *Fragments of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press 1985) pp 38–108. Louis Wirth. 'Urbanism as a way of life' *American Journal of Sociology*, vol 44 (1938) pp 1–24.

The Net explores the internet's promise of new forms of sociability that transcend the limitations of the existing public – private divide. Yet the blurring of this divide is regarded with concern. The internet is credited with eroding the integrity of the domestic sphere, which in turn can no longer safeguard sociability from the freedoms and anonymity of the public sphere. Ultimately, the new technology is seen to disrupt profoundly the liberal premiss of a functional balance between public and private spheres. We are thus offered a return to the liberal city, which now is deemed a place far safer than the unbounded space of the internet.

Unlike the other films considered here, in *The Net* the internet itself is conceived explicitly as an invisible system of information that has no seductive visual forms through which it engages the viewer. It is signified (textually) within the traditional terms of the city: the name of the computer company employing the victim/heroine, Angela Bennett, is Cathedral, while the programme that infiltrates medical, monetary and transport systems is called Gatekeepers. When Bennett attempts to explain the false sense of security introduced by Gatekeepers she uses the story of the Trojan horse. But inbetween these traditional markers of urban centre and boundaries there is little to engage the body or the eye. The screen of the internet holds many fears but few attractions, and remains surprisingly dull. Implicitly, the film presents an uncomplicated

27 Lefebvre *The Production of Space* p 97

28 Elizabeth Grosz 'Bodies-cities' in Beatriz Colomina (ed.), *Sexuality and Space* (Princeton NJ: Princeton Architectural Press 1992) p 245. Easthope 'Cinecities in the sixties' pp 130–31

argument for Lefebvre's critique of visuality, in which abstract space crushes and diminishes lived experience and, while it unleashes desire, it is a desire that must 'make do with words'.²⁷ Moreover, the internet, like the image of the city against which it is contextualized, is external to human bodies, an alienating environment that threatens the body's humanity but keeps in place a clear distinction between the two – that is, between object and subject.²⁸

At the beginning of the film, the internet is a space of sexual freedom for Angela, a computer hacker/systems programmer. Angela Bennett, has no 'actual' sexual relationships in her present or near past, but sexual innuendo permeates her computer chat with business clients and internet friends in the electronic chat room that she frequents. She can brush off a client's sexual advances by hanging-up the phone. She jokes with her boss about resisting workplace surveillance by working in her home. But then she inadvertently encounters a plot to control the world through the internet (via Gatekeepers) and is herself terrorized through its manipulation of information, and its ability to erase, alter and misconstrue identities.

Yet if the standard narrative of a woman increasingly exposed to danger is here given new resonance by the internet's ability to impinge on identity, what emerges as of greater concern is technology's erosion of this woman's personal relationships to the point of her complete vulnerability. In this film, the severed links within the social sphere make possible the threatening relationships and fragile identities of the internet. The film opens with Angela alone in the closed interior space of her single-family house in Santa Monica. She is isolated and entirely unfamiliar with her neighbours, but this suburban seclusion is linked to the illusory security of technology rather than the implications of segmented urban space. Although a workstation exists for her at Cathedral headquarters in San Francisco, she has never been there, nor met her boss face to face. Traditional domesticity is both disrupted and mediated by her computer: dinner is a pizza ordered through the internet and a computer screen displaying an image of a burning fire occupies the hearth. In this place of impoverished sociability, Angela's competency as a computer programmer is very soon read as lack, as a hollow compensation for her loneliness. Her dire situation is, however, overtly contrasted with that of her male counterpart whose socialization, defined in terms of both private (wedding ring) and public (office space) relations is not at odds with his success as a computer hacker.

If the film reminds us of the impoverishment of Lefebvre's abstract space, it is even more insistent about the (ambivalent) pleasures and safety of the city. The plot of *The Net* is entirely dependent on a conception of the internet and urban space as linked in a constant dichotomy of threat and possibility, and it is the points of linkage, where the limitations of one lead the main character to

the other, that dictate the narrative's shift from the instances of Angela's victimization to her heroism. In contrast to her savvy approach in front of the computer screen, in the public domain Angela's presence is negated and diminished, especially as her internet adversaries begin to erase and rearrange her computerized identity. From the moment she returns to her holiday hotel in Mexico and is told that she does not exist, the formation of her identity in a public, and now computerized, sphere is shown to be detached from, and much more powerful than, her bodily presence. Almost immediately, this loss of identity impinges on the most crucial means of securing a liberal sense of self, namely the private domain. Upon her return to Los Angeles, she finds her home for sale, and all its contents, presumably the last vestiges of past social relationships, removed.

As the horrors of internet surveillance advance, the possibilities of the city are celebrated, albeit in a somewhat ambivalent way. When Angela arranges to meet an internet friend who might have useful information, she opts to avoid the relentless surveillance of the internet by meeting him in the 'safety' of a public space, which turns out to be one of the most familiar tropes of the thriller, the amusement park. Here identity is presented as ambivalent: while masks, disguises and reflecting surfaces produce a stressful and dangerous illegibility, the park also offers the possibilities of anonymity and escape. As Angela gains the upper hand, the film moves her through spaces of sociability she had earlier rejected. Thus to regain her identity she must return to the net, not through her usual laptop, but through the office outlet assigned to the woman who now, having taken her identity, holds a job in the Cathedral computer company. The sociability within the space of the office is stressed, and not only as a device to heighten the dangers of Angela infiltrating this space. It is also represented in clear contrast to the isolated home computer system within which Angela earlier operated. A large political street rally, emblematic of liberal public discourse, enables her to escape her pursuers. Yet this too is represented in an ambivalent manner. The rally, demanding change in the medical care system, presupposes a liberal outlook but also activates fears and anxieties about the nature of the crowd through its carnivalesque costumes of the grotesque and the dead. Ultimately, the urban crowd is presented as a space of possibility and safety, but only when it is privatized within the public space of a large computer convention, at which Angela eventually defeats her adversaries.

We see in *The Net* a reinscription of the pleasures of the home and domesticity. After Angela successfully challenges her lack of place in the city, she returns to a surprisingly traditional notion of domestic space. At the end of the film, the image of home is very different from that at the beginning, and the film uses overt visual clues to prompt the viewer to draw a comparison. The home

computer system that was the home now becomes a home which happens to have a computer. Instead of a claustrophobic darkened room with flashing computer screens, Angela's house is shown through well-lit open spaces, and our heroine, instead of looking at the computer screen, looks outwards towards the open door and the garden which her mother is planting. She not only sees things differently but also takes on a different external appearance. No longer defined by jeans and baggy, checked shirt, Angela's newly acquired femininity is evidenced by her pulled-back hair, long casual dress and ankle bracelet. In the closing scene of the film she accompanies her mother out to the garden to help her plant, but she will not venture too far, for the roots being replanted are to keep her safe at home.

Angela's relationship with her mother shifts dramatically throughout the film. Her mother suffers from Alzheimer's disease and continually fails to recognize her. For most of the film her mother is housed in an institution, but by the end Angela has returned her to her home. Angela is refigured as mother to her mother, and as the maternal displaces the computer hacker, the home is reinstated as a solidly domestic rather than commercial space – and Angela seems happier for it. Director Winkler summarizes this point nicely: 'So this is a story of growth. What happens to her is the worst thing that possibly could. Somebody tries to kill her. And yet, it turns out it's the best thing that ever could happen to her because it takes her out of that closed-off world into the world outside and she learns that there's no life just living behind a computer. I think that's a lesson that we're all getting today.'²⁹ What Winkler fails to note is that in this film, what the computer and the 'world outside' hold for the individual is clearly dependent on gender.

Just as the liberal city promises much to the individual, so too in *The Net* the internet promises individual freedom from sexual overtures and workplace surveillance. Yet these freedoms carry with them the dangers of loss of control of both identity and space. The film resolves this tension by returning Angela to the home. In effect it opts for the postwar solution, the return of women to the suburbs and the reinscription of the public and private divide. Thus while the film targets a female audience by raising the current concern for women's equity (and thus is marketed as up to date and even progressive), ironically it is able to resolve the contradiction of the promises and dangers for the individual within the internet precisely because Angela as a woman can more easily be resituated in the home. As noted earlier, Angela's male colleague has apparently successfully negotiated the public/private sphere, he balances hacking with the conventions of the traditional private realm (marriage) and public sphere (the office).³⁰ The excesses and dangers of the internet (particularly in relation to identity) are located in Angela, and are

²⁹ Interview with *The Net* director Irwin Winkler. URL: http://www.spe.sony.com/pictures/sony_movies/archive/index.html

³⁰ Which is not to say that the internet hold no dangers for him: Angela's male colleague is actually killed when he uncovers the 'bad guy's' plot, but this is a quick death that occurs early on in the film and it does not involve the erasure of identity that Angela experiences.

resolved by sending her back into the conventional domestic realm of the city.³¹

31 This suspicion of technology often emerges in films that initially define the site of the internet as a new opportunity for women and represent them as technologically competent: these films overstate the case. A 1995 survey of internet users indicates that two thirds of internet users are men (Graham and Aurigi *Virtual cities* p 26)

32 See for example Le Corbusier, *The City of Tomorrow and its Planning* (trans F Etchells (New York: Payson and Clark 1929)) and *The Radiant City* (trans P Knight, E Leveux and D Colman (New York: The Orion Press 1967)). On poetic aspects of lives within modernist urbanism see Ian Borden, *Playtime: Tataville and Paris* in Neil Leach (ed.) *The Hieroglyphics of Space, Reading and Experiencing the Modern Metropolis* (London and New York: Routledge 2002)

33 Vidler, 'Bodies in space' pp 33–6

34 Paul Virilio *The overexposed city* *Zone* vol 1 no 2 (1986) pp 123–38

The internet in a utopian modernist city: *Hackers*

In Softley's film *Hackers*, computerized technology is represented through the vision of a modernist city of transparency and circulation, exemplified by New York. This is an image of the city reminiscent of Le Corbusier's 1920s plans for a highly organized and entirely efficient urban environment through which the collective would be brought into social cohesion.³² As with all utopias, this is a notion of the city extricated from any actual social terrain, envisioned as emerging from the blank page of the urban planner, but invariably responding to the anxieties and fears around particular urban social conflict.³³ Located within such an urban vision, this film's representation of the internet focuses on the pleasures of a visual perception already encoded within modernist urban utopias, but raises questions about the diminishment of bodily desire associated with this new technology.

The interplay between the city and the internet is made explicit in the striking visual merging of the city and electronic space. A key opening sequence shows the viewpoint of the hero as he flies into New York City. We are offered a wide-angle view of the urban mass that shifts into a view directly from above, and then into a technologized variation in which physical access is conveyed by way of speedy electronic trajectories. We are propelled into a visual experience of the city in which distance is transformed into speed, an experience enabled by a cityscape reduced to the stark lines of skyscrapers receding in rigid perspectival formation and heightened through the computer skills required to achieve it. This surely refers to a modernist image of efficiency and progress. This is Virilio's over-exposed city without depth, where buildings and streets function as sets for the circulation of information.³⁴

Representations of this modernist city fuse into representations of cyberspace. In the internet itself, skyscrapers are reconstructed out of written text, text that moves and reshapes the interior space in terms of ordered information, and conveys the transformative powers of these symbols. As the representations of the real city fuse into a computerized version, the city emerges as clean, unobstructed, and shaped through stark phallic skyscrapers. Through the convergence of city and internet, the relationship between subject and object becomes blurred. On the screen, it brings the hacker to the very limits of embodiment. Navigating through the space of the internet invariably entails a symbolic encounter with death, as the skill and speed with which one moves through the electronic city is tested against the constant threat of being terminated, shot, burned. The

exhilaration of being brought to the edge of physical death is a conventional aspect of coming-of-age narratives,³⁵ yet here this titillating journey to one's bodily limits is rehearsed, repeated and thus endlessly altered. Desire around the body entails a constant state of vacillation between dismemberment and wholeness. And this fantasy, in which the body is simultaneously evacuated and celebrated, is one that the film, as much as modernist planners, seeks to reconstruct within the actual city.

The hackers, as a liminal community, embody the potential of this modernist city of order and adopt the opportunities of speed, circulation and transcendence of traditional social and physical boundaries. In the uninterrupted flow of their movements, the hackers are distinguished from others in the city. They traverse and manipulate the urban terrain with skill and dexterity, unimpeded by people or traffic lights since they fix the traffic lights by hacking into the computer system that controls them. And while the latest in-line skates and skateboards facilitate their dynamic circulation, they also mock commodified culture by, for example, establishing free access to long-distance phone calls.

The promise of universal citizenship in the modern city is evident in the fact that the community of hackers is global, multiracial and multicultural, and includes both men and women. It appears to transcend class boundaries. The hackers' manifesto articulates this view:

This is our world now. The world of the electron and the switch, the beauty of the bond. We exist without nationality, skin colour, or religious bias. You wage wars, murder, cheat, lie to us, try to make us believe that it is for our own good. Yes I am a criminal. My crime is that of curiosity. I am a hacker and this is my manifesto. You may stop me but you can't stop us all.

And, indeed the group of young hackers in the film is multicultural. Latino, African-American, Jewish, and Anglo. The final 'shootdown' with the evil corporate hacker requires the help of two cross-dressing Chinese-American celebrity hackers who recruit a worldwide underground of hackers, an older businessman hacking on his laptop in London's city district, a young Japanese woman and her boyfriend clad in black leather, two Russian men in a bar, and an 'alternative' Italian man and woman.

The concept of universal citizenship actualized through cyberspace is nevertheless contained within the boundaries of a liminal community. As with the iconography of da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, used in this film to call up the virus that threatens the world and unites the hacker community, the potential of citizenship is firmly delimited within the *appearance* of inclusion. The assumptions of the coming-of-age film permeates *Hackers'* narrative. The crucial passage between child and adult enables the film's claims of freedom and

transgression, claims that the metaphors of the modernist city – speed, transparency, verticality – demand. Critics of modernity and universalism insist that ideals of universalism have always been constructed in gendered, racialized and classed terms. Access to the ideal city as a site of perfect proportions and social order, represented by the image of Vitruvian Man, has similarly been socially prescribed. With all of the promises to the contrary, *Hackers* repeats this selective access to the modern city in its portrayal of access to cyberspace.

The uneven access of men and women to cyberspace is evident in the fact that the sole young woman (Kate) within the group of hackers is the only one who cannot escape her body. She is frequently shown engaged in sexual encounters, notably with a boyfriend who seems to know nothing about computers. In contrast to Kate, the gang of teenage male hackers direct their erotic desires onto the visual and commodified space of the computer. Having entered Kate's bedroom (Kate is having embodied sex in the room at the time), they find her computer. Huddled around the computer, they declare 'I want it. I want it to have my children.' Although Kate's sexuality is lively and assertive, it should nevertheless be noted that, as a woman, she never loses the immediacy of her body, and that furthermore she plays the role of enticing Dade (the hero) away from technology and back into his body.

So too, the ideal of multiculturalism is never achieved in the film. Significantly, criminality remains racialized. It is noteworthy that when the young white hero/hacker, Dade, reveals the truth of his identity – that he is in fact the child prodigy hacker Zero Cool who stood trial for his criminal hacker activities at the age of eleven – it is the African-American hacker in their group who knows the details of his accomplishments and exclaims 'I thought you was black, man!' The film, then, does nothing to dislodge stereotypes of black male criminality, and the fact that hacking is presented as a crime may make it more possible, and indeed attractive, to represent it as an activity dominated by 'non-whites'. The hackers are also represented as extreme individualists, who live outside other communities of sociability and thus outside race or culture. They are represented as having strong bonds to their mothers but to no one else.³⁶ As the evil hacker intones, 'We're hackers. For us, there is no such thing as families and friends. We're each our own country, with temporary allies and enemies.' As individuals, plugged into, and joined together by, consumer cultures of clothes and computers, they simultaneously mock and embody the spectacularization of race in contemporary consumer society.³⁷ They embody difference, yes, but a difference that has been depoliticized, and absorbed and homogenized within consumer capitalist society. The hackers are also positioned differently within the film narrative depending on their race and class. The hero and heroine are both white, Anglo and middle class.

³⁶ This can be interpreted as another instance of the way in which these films celebrate motherhood and is especially interesting given Jeffrey Deitch's contention that new constructions of the self are no longer tied to family.

³⁷ Caren Kaplan, 'A world without boundaries: The Body Shop's trans/national geographics', *Social Text*, vol. 43 (1995), pp. 45–66; Lisa Lowe, 'LA in the production of multiculturalism', in Avery Gordon and Christopher Newfield (eds), *Mapping Multiculturalism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 413–23.

Kate's mother is a best-selling, feminist writer and they live in a lavish Manhattan apartment, and Dade is destined for MIT. They have the best technology and are the cleverest of their group. In the end, they require the assistance of two Asian hackers: Asian, white, Latino, African-American. There is nothing in this hierarchical ordering that would disturb the thesis of *The Bell Curve*, which critics see as a notorious contemporary reinscription of biological racial difference.³⁸

Hackers, then, explores the desire for transcendence of traditional distinctions of difference, a desire so frequently expressed in relation to cyberspace.³⁹ It actualizes that desire through the imagery of the skyscraper modernist city. But just as the architects of the modernist city of steel and glass never disrupted the social relationships of class or social difference (class was, for example, rigidly written into some of the most influential of modernist urban designs, including Le Corbusier's Radiant City),⁴⁰ *Hackers'* veneer of multicultural equality is easily scratched away to reveal systematic hierarchies of social inequality. Mobility, speed, youthful liminality, and the pleasures of transgression veil these relationships but they do not disturb them.

Hackers does nonetheless articulate an ambivalence – fear alongside desire – that lies latent in the modernist city of transparency. The plot of *Hackers* revolves around the discovery of an older rival hacker in the service of two (middle-aged) corrupt corporate executives, who threaten ecological destruction to satisfy their personal greed. They are able to accomplish this through a computer programme – named GOD – arrayed in the form of the modernist city. But with nothing beyond corrupt ageing individuals and an idealized notion of a youthful 'global village', we are left with little but a celebration of youth. This is a stance that merely reproduces the high technology industry's preference for youthful hackers, as more fully exploitable employees.⁴¹ The notion of liminality with its possibility for transgression is thus revealed as a desire for a return to order.

Computerised technology in the postmodern city *Strange Days*

Fears and desires surrounding computerized technologies are articulated very differently in the postmodern as opposed to the modern city. In Bigelow's *Strange Days*, Los Angeles is configured both in terms of the well-established tropes of the futuristic dystopian city and film noir's subjectification of the urban landscape.⁴² Movement through the city is interrupted, conflictual and violent, contrasting with the movement in the city of *Hackers*. Los Angeles is here viewed through wet, dark, steamy streets, uncontrolled crowds, an oppressive military, and random acts of violence and

38 Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: Free Press, 1994); Steve Fraser (ed.) *The Bell Curve Wars: Race, Intelligence, and the Future of America* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); Claude Fischer *Inequality by Design: Cracking the Bell Curve Myth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

39 In this racialization of electronic space, these films could be read as offering a view of actual access and production. Tracing geographies of centralization and marginalization, Saskia Sassen in 'Electronic space', *Journal of Urban Technology*, vol. 4, no. 1 (1997), pp. 1–18, notes that while in 1995 New York City had the largest concentration of cable-served buildings in the world, Harlem – only two miles north of Manhattan – had only one such building. South Central, Los Angeles, the likely site of the authentic, non-technologized black community in *Strange Days*, had none.

40 Robert Fishman *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

41 Renata Salecl 'The disbelief in the big other in the university and beyond', presented at The University as/in Contested Space Conference, University of British Columbia, 1 May 1998.

42 *Strange Days* was meant for a mass audience: it opened on 1691 screens but had a disappointing gross of only \$3 656 012 on the first weekend. See Lizzie Francke 'Virtual fears', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 5, no. 12 (1995), pp. 4–7. On film noir representations of city, see Krutniw 'Something more than night', pp. 83–109.

degradation. In keeping with a type of postmodern pluralism, however, the film also offers a somewhat more complicated representation of the postmodern city. The sleaziness of the motel-like apartment of the *antihero*, Lenny, is contrasted with the middle-class familial domesticity of the heroine, Mace. The authoritarianism of the Los Angeles Police Department is opposed to the grassroots political organizing of Jeriko One. Furthermore, the film does not skirt the radical racial and class segregation of the city. African-Americans are shown to live outside of multicultural LA in racially homogenous communities, and extremes of wealth and poverty are evident. A postmodern blurring of other boundaries also exacerbates fragmentation. Ethical ambiguity and the fragility of order in the city are embodied by the hero, Lenny, a washed-up cop who now sells SQUID (the Superconducting Quantum Interference Device) on the black market. The line between entertainment and politics is also blurred. The plot eventually pivots on the murder of Jeriko One, a black rap artist turned political organizer who is assassinated by the police. Are we viewing the politicization of aesthetics or the aestheticization of politics? It is not clear.

Within this city of fragmentation and moral and political ambiguity, the potential of computerized technologies is actualized. The technology under consideration is SQUID, an apparatus that can record audiovisual sensations 'straight from the cerebral cortex'. Via thirty-minute 'playback clips', these experiences can then be re-experienced by another person. Just as the city is not singular in its representation, so too the technology is represented as holding multiple opportunities. Against the largely dystopic vision of LA represented in the film, SQUID offers the promise of reintegration and reconnection with 'reality'. This happens at different levels, and is built into both the visual production and the narrative of the film. It is built into the visual production of the film insofar as the film conveys the images of virtual reality as somehow more 'real' than those experienced within the city itself. The sequences that replicate the experience of playback are visually distinctive, produced with a hand-held video camera, a single continuous viewpoint and an overt lack of framing. This viewing point, constantly in movement and offering a frantic and jarring bombardment of impressions, suggests a continuous sequence of time. It conveys a notion of being *within* the action rather than watching it as a voyeur. In this respect, these sequences appear to be less mediated than the rest of the film, which relies on more conventional film techniques of intercutting from various angles so that a diversity of perspectives emerge yet are contained within a seamless continuity.

The film is nonetheless self-reflexive and morally ambivalent about this construction of 'realism' through a visual technology. Virtual reality is constantly shown to be virtual, which is to say constructed.

This occurs not only in scenes in which Lenny instructs those whose experiences are to be filmed on how to enhance their performance, but also by the very fixation on the possibilities of the technology and its ability to construct what it represents. In effect, the film asserts that there is no fixed object to be known outside of the process of representation, and that it is the technology that produces the body and its desire.

The desire to occupy other bodies through 'playback' are for the most part defined as the repressed 'underside', a conflation of violence, sexuality and racism that is ironically but a heightened version of what happens on the streets. When Lenny outlines the possibilities of playback to a prospective (white, male) client, the second scenario that he outlines (right after the fantasy of running into a liquor store with a 350 Magnum in his hand) is that of inhabiting the body of a (non-white) man in the bar next to him. 'See that guy with the drop-dead Filipino girlfriend? Wouldn't you want to be that guy for twenty minutes . . . for the right twenty minutes?' He offers the possibility of crossing race, inhabiting another's body, of having sex with an unknown Filipino woman. But this is represented as 'the stuff that you can't have . . . forbidden fruit', as a voyeuristic pleasure that will not disrupt existing fragmented social relationships. His customer can experience this without actually knowing the Filipino woman, and without, in Lenny's words, 'tarnishing [his] wedding ring'.

The film seems to offer a critique of voyeuristic sadism, which it places at the centre of US culture, and does this in a self-reflexive way. For the viewer is forced to watch the pleasures that Lenny sells, along with one he does not condone – a lengthy rape and murder.⁴³ Thus the film's critique of playback circles onto itself, and viewers are also forced to examine their complicity in voyeurism and the production of desire.

Within the narrative of *Strange Days*, computerized technologies also actualize a desire for experience beyond fragmentation, and suggest a way of re-experiencing a sense of bodily integrity and wholeness. By obsessively watching his past sexual experiences with his lost lover, Lenny reconnects his past with his present commitment to protect and love her. In another sequence, playback technology allows another male character, who has no legs and is confined to a wheelchair, to re-experience an intact body and the sensation of running along the beach. In such a space, computer technologies offer a fantasy space for reimagining bodily movement and integrity, but one that constantly merges with other bodies and desires. Lenny explains 'This is not like TV, only better. This is life. It's a piece of someone else's life. It's pure and uncut, straight from the cerebral cortex. I mean, you're there, you're doing it, you're seeing it, you're hearing, you're *feeling* it.' Here Lenny is thus selling a full sensory – not just a visual – experience. As a fully

43 Francke describes the film as the most violent ever directed by a woman in Hollywood. See *Virtual fears* p. 7.

44 Hillis A geography of the eye ,
p 71

sensual, corporeal experience, the abstract space of computer technology, unlike that described by Lefebvre, may function as a repository of desires for wholeness, at both the individual and community level. Crucially, it also allows for the merging of an individuated consciousness into difference and a larger whole.⁴⁴ It is an abstract space that promises integrity beyond the uninhabitable abstract space of the postmodern city.

But, again, the film is ambivalent about such possibilities. The potential for bodily and psychic integration through playback is also represented as a drug-like evasion from reality. This is articulated by Mace, who is outspoken in her rejection of playback as pornographic narcotic. Mace herself, however, develops a more complex relationship to the technology when, at the insistence of Lenny, she finally views playback. Recalling the videotape of the beating of Rodney King by members of the Los Angeles police in 1992, playback also accidentally documents racist police brutality – the murder of Jeriko One. Viewing this playback clip, Mace recognizes its potential. ‘This tape is a lightning bolt from God. It can change things. Things that need changing before we all go off the end of the road.’

45 The phrase is from Lowe
LA in the production of
multiculturalism p 417

In the final scenes, the film attempts to reconcile and resolve the conflicts and despair of the postmodern city through a ‘synthetic production of multiculturalism’.⁴⁵ These represent the first minutes of a new millennium, which are evoked through the kisses and embraces of multiracial couples in the street. Such a resolution, however, is never achieved in relation to technology. The main narrative structure of the film perpetuates gendered racial inequalities in an uncritical way. Technology may hold multiple promises but they are unevenly distributed across social groups. The central tension around the interpretation of SQUID is played out by Lenny and Mace; it is a gendered and racialized one.

46 James Bowman Friendly
persuasion *The American
Spectator* (December 1995)
p 69 Francke Virtual fears
p 6 Gavin Smith, Momentum
and design *Film Comment*
(September–October 1995)
pp 46–50 Jack Kroll
Apocalypse soon *Newsweek*
16 October 1995

Critical reaction to the film repeatedly draws attention to the gender-bending nature of Mace and Lenny.⁴⁶ Mace enacts a hard masculinized sexuality, the camera lingers over her powerful physique and she routinely saves Lenny when he is under physical attack. Mace is physically strong, unwavering in her loyalties to Lenny, firm in her politics and moral choices. Lenny plays against this with his attitude of moral ambivalence, his open emotionality, his soft body, and his long, dress-like jackets.

Mace may be the masculinized woman to Lenny’s feminized man, but she is also firmly located within her role as mother, mother to a child in whose name she upholds a virtuous stance and for whose future she pursues the political goals of the black community. Just before she consents to watch playback for the first time, the film, in one of its very few contemplative moments, has Mace lingering over the sight of her young son celebrating with fireworks among other members of the black community. And for all her androgyny, Mace’s sexual desire is focused on Lenny, who with his moral ambivalence

and less than perfect personal grooming, is everything she disdains, but whose attraction is held within a single moment in the past, the moment in which he, as a police officer, protected her vulnerable son

In a rare comment on the racial dynamics in the film, *Strange Days* has been described as a 'miscegenation romance'⁴⁷ But the situation is somewhat more complex. Mace loves Lenny but for most of the film this is not reciprocated. The film upholds traditional racial stereotypes As chauffeur and security guard, Mace merges two clichés Mammie and phallic black Amazon Furthermore, and central to our argument, Mace's physicality is at odds with technology And although Lenny and Mace finally come together as a romantic couple, they remain positioned in opposition to each other in the space of technology, one on the side of pleasure and escape, the other on the side of politics in the real time and real space of the city. *Strange Days* finally brings Mace into a relationship with technology, but, notably, through an abbreviated subjectivity in the absence of fantasy and desire

In a familiar juxtaposition between technology and authenticity, African-Americans are a repository of authenticity, be it as community or as the source of oppositional politics⁴⁸ Jeriko One, in a music video, raps 'You love that red white and blue, but you hate black black black' He speaks as a more conventional political activist on the podium during a 'Unity Rally': 'We live in a police state . . . They are arranging deck chairs on the Titanic. . . But a new day is coming. The day of reckoning is upon us. History is and begins again Right here Right now ' Jeriko One embodies a mocking, violent but committed politics – he is credited with unifying disparate nonwhite groups in opposition to the LAPD African-Americans also embody a lost familial community When Lenny and Mace realize the extent of their personal danger, they return to Mace's house, a conventionally homey domestic space complete with carefully trimmed Christmas tree There they retrieve her son and take him to the safety of his Aunt Cecile's house, in an all-black, segregated part of Los Angeles, where a family-based New Year's Eve party is in progress. In this context Lenny is looked on with suspicion, revealing the extent of racial segregation in the real time and space of the city The African-American community, meanwhile, is situated on a higher moral ground, exposing a yearning for real politics and attachments even as this community remains a source of change and danger to white American society.

The African-American community is thus a space apart from, and in opposition to, the cultural exhaustion, pleasures and impotence of white LA⁴⁹ For the most part, nonwhites are locked out of filmic representations of the production and use of computer technologies these are technologies constructed by and for whites The exclusion of African-Americans from the use of technology takes on moral

47 Francke 'Virtual fears' p 6

48 Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins
Reading National Geographic
(Chicago IL: University of
Chicago Press 1993)

49 We see a similar binary
(white technology/non-white real
politics) at work in *Virtuosity*

overtones in *Strange Days*, which in this respect seems to reimpose a sense of urban order that belies its claim to a postmodern city of difference, fragmentation and plurality.

This retrieves the functional role of 'blackness' as critique of US culture, described by Richard Dyer in relation to the *Living Dead* films (*Night of the Living Dead* [Tom Savini, 1969], *Dawn of the Dead* [George A Romero, 1978] and *Day of the Dead* [George A Romero, 1985]):

In all three films it is significant that the hero is a black man, and not just because this makes him 'different', but because it makes it possible to see that whites are the living dead . . . The point about [the black heroes] is that in their different ways they all have control over their bodies, are able to use them to survive, know how to do things with them.⁵⁰

The fear of one's own body, of how one controls it and relates to it, and the fear of not being able to control other bodies, those bodies whose exploitation is so fundamental to capitalist economy, are both at the heart of whiteness. Never has this horror been more deliriously evoked than in these films of the *Dead*.⁵¹

Strange Days can, we think, also be read as engaging with white Americans' fears about loss of bodily control in the postmodern city and narcotic efforts to regain control through virtual reality, a drugged-out status that leaves the 'real' city in the control of African-Americans. It is perhaps unfair to place a purely paranoid reading on the film's portrayal of African-Americans as we have noted, the film ends with a New Year's celebration in a multiracial public space. Nevertheless, most of the film works against this representation of multiculturalism, and we must question the effects of African-Americans embodying difference outside of technology. Does locating authenticity and morality in a pre-technological African-American community not present a hip, urban version of primitivism? Many of the desires (for example, sex with an unknown Filipino woman) and fears (loss of control of one's own and others' bodies) articulated in relation to computerized technology return us to the system of inequalities built into and unresolved in the postmodern city. And in its inversions (Mace as powerful and middle class and Lenny as weak and marginal) computerized technologies in *Strange Days* may perpetuate contemporary fears and desires rather than opening opportunities for new ones.

E. Ann Kaplan has speculated that digital technologies may usher in a 'different scopic regime' in which

the male gaze, the imperial gaze and subject-object looking in general becomes all but impossible. . . . In the new cyberage,

50 Richard Dyer *White Screen*
vol 29 no 4 (1988) pp 44-64
59

51 *Ibid* p 63

problems relating to modernist inter-racial and inter-gender looking relations and power imbalances may be subordinated to larger changes in cultural organization (and disorganization) brought about by the new technologies⁵²

Somewhat wistfully, and as we have observed here, she nonetheless recognizes that we will carry into cyberspace ongoing social formations. Certainly in the films that we consider, desires for transcendence and wholeness are never quite achieved, and we are continually returned to exceedingly conservative discourses of gender, sexuality and race. In part this is due to the kinds of genres of film – thriller, teenage rebellion drama, futuristic adventure – that have taken up cyberspace and their overriding narrative strategies and pleasures.

But beyond the constraints of particular genres, we have argued that the fears and promises of cyberspace are worked out in these films in relation to a particular model of the city. The city is more than a site in which the narrative about electronic space is located, the city functions as a template through which electronic space is figured. Representations of the city are themselves structured fantasies. By structuring our understandings of the potentials of cyberspace in relation to the city, we drag one set of representations into another, but in ways that disrupt this space so as to continually remind us that social differences persist in and around cyberspace. In *The Net*, the focus is mostly on fears surrounding the internet's capacity to erode both the private and public spheres. The film resolves this by reinscribing these divisions. *The Net* ultimately rejects electronic space (for women) and returns us to one version of the modern city, sharply divided between 'the crowd' and domesticity. In *Hackers*, the film explores the potential for crossing borders through the flow of information. This potential is concretized through the image of the city as circuit. *Hackers* works to construct a more optimistic rendering of the internet through notions of the transparent modernist city. In this film, the city and electronic space are merged in fantasies of movement, order and organization. In *Strange Days*, virtual reality compensates for the postmodern urban condition. It promises reembodiment and integration beyond the fragmentation of the city. Rather than a space of movement that frees identity from bodily constraints, electronic space enables a dense web of embodied experiences, no longer possible in the abstract spaces of the postmodern city. In *Strange Days*, the technology is evaluated ambivalently, our concern is that the play of difference is not so playful in so far as it takes the form of primitivizing African-Americans. Perhaps ironically, all of these films ultimately return us to the body and the city as sites for the fulfilment of desire.

Geographical metaphors offer a way of thinking about a space that

53 J. Browning 'Who's what on the web' *Wired* (August 1996) p. 33 cited in Graham and Auriol *Virtual cities* p. 26

is difficult otherwise to imagine. Yet, through this process of concretization they also shape and limit this thinking. Contemporary films about the internet are troubling because they offer no stable place for women or nonwhite citizens within the space of the internet. Ultimately cyberspace is represented as a space for white heterosexual men only. This disruption of difference in what Lefebvre might have called the abstractions of electronic space is telling in so far as it alerts us to the possibility that cultural celebrations of cyberspace as a post-identity utopia may be both an effect of (and veil for) social differences. Assessing a 1995 survey of internet users, J. Browning concluded that cyberspace looked 'remarkably white, middle-class and well educated'⁵³ But if these films display a certain 'truth' about gendered, racialized and class access to electronic space, they do nothing to problematize it. If one shares Kaplan's optimism for the creation of a different scopic regime and new social relationships in cyberspace, we need to work with these urban disruptions to engage critically with the rhetoric of the abstract spaces of electronic technologies. The weight of so much feminist criticism has been to expand the space of the city for groups other than white heterosexual men. It appears that we have a new frontier.

The family changes colour: interracial families in contemporary Hollywood film

NICOLA EVANS

*How profound the hatred, how deep the bigotry that awakens in
this image of black life blooming within white It is an image
that squeezes racism out from the pores of people who deny they
are racist*

Patricia Williams¹

¹ Patricia Williams *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991) p. 189

In December 1998, DNA tests identified Thomas Jefferson as the father of at least one child with his black slave woman Sally Hemings. The discovery spawned numerous commentaries in the media on the significance of this finding and many large claims were made. Superficially what was at stake was the right of Hemings's descendants to claim Jefferson as an ancestor and to be buried in the Monticello family plot, a right long contested by some of Jefferson's white descendants who control the foundation and the graveyard. But there were many who saw the decision as symbolic not just of a past that the USA had erased, but a future towards which it might tend. For Lucian Truscott IV, a white Jeffersonian descendant who supports the Hemings's claim, the finding affirmed that this country 'is a family not only in democratic theory, but in blood'.² Allusions to the national family were quickly buttressed by parallels drawn between Jefferson and William Jefferson Clinton, another president accused of extramarital liaisons, whose 1992 campaign was attended by rumours that he had fathered a black child.³ Lisa Jones, writing in the *Village Voice*, summed up the tenor of many commentaries by

² Cited in Lisa Jones 'Grave matters at Monticello' *Village Voice* 5 January 1999

³ *New York Times* 13 February 2000; *New Statesman* 6 November 1998

declaring 'I can't think of a more potent metaphor of American race relations at the millennium than the battle over graveyard space at Monticello'.⁴

The findings of the Monticello committee capped a decade in which a surprising number of films, both mainstream and art-house, began to explore familial ties that cross the colour line. Some of these films, such as *Made in America* (Richard Benjamin, 1993), *Secrets and Lies* (Mike Leigh, 1996) and *A Family Thing* (Richard Pearce, 1996), have plots reminiscent of abolitionist literature, in which the discovery of an interracial relationship in the past throws the family into melodramatic disarray. Other films, including *Six Degrees of Separation* (Fred Schepisi, 1993), *Smoke* (Wayne Wang, 1995), *Losing Isaiah* (Stephen Gyllenhaal, 1995) and *Finding Forrester* (Gus van Sant, 2000), feature whites who become symbolic parents to black children, often with the suggestion that these metaphorical ties are more rewarding than the relationships the parents have with their own white children. The question this paper considers is whether the growing screen presence of the interracial family is a step forward in the task of imagining more democratic race relations. If our concept of the family changed colour – from white to something more multicoloured – would this strengthen and improve interracial bonds as many activists through history have insisted, or is the fight for inclusion in the family plot indeed a fight for graveyard space?

For mainstream films to be considering interracial relations at all is a departure. When it comes to race Hollywood has toed the colour line, producing either all-black films, or white-cast films with token representation of African-Americans. The rare instances in which interracial relations occur are designed to be temporary, or to end tragically.⁵ Even the black and white buddy movie, the most popular format for including interraciality, typically suppresses or evades racial issues through rousing paeans to the race-transcendent bonds of masculinity.⁶ For mainstream films to be exploring interracial families is startling. Both on screen and off, the taboo against race-mixing within the family has seemed particularly strong. In the quotation that heads this paper, Patricia Williams suggests that the image of a mother suckling a child of another race is an idea that sticks in the gullet of even those who are most liberal on race issues. Benetton, a company famous for its taboo-breaking advertisements, appeared to agree when in 1989 they cancelled a campaign that proposed to feature a poster of a black mother breast-feeding a white child.⁷ What is special about the family that makes the imagination balk at the prospect of race-mixing here, even when cautiously permissive of interracial friendships outside the family?

Until recently, the censorship of interraciality on screen was matched by a paucity of interracial studies in scholarship. Gregory Stephens notes the tendency among scholars to pathologize

4 Jones 'Grave matters at Monticello'

5 Ed Guerrero 'Spike Lee and the fever in the racial jungle' in Jim Collins, Hilary Radner and Ava Preacher Collins (eds) *Film Theory Goes to the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1993)

6 Robyn Wiegman, 'Black bodies/American commodities' in Lester D. Friedman (ed.) *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1991)

7 *Mother Jones*, January 1990

- 8 Gregory Stephens *On Racial Frontiers: the New Culture of Frederick Douglass, Ralph Ellison and Bob Marley* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999), p. 6

interraciality, viewing every relationship that crosses racial lines as inevitably exploitative or oppressive. As Stephens points out, such an assumption enforces the colour line by making 'any interracial relations beyond rape or genocide unimaginable'.⁸ Citing Frederick Douglass's definition of racism as 'diseased imagination', Stephens calls us to begin the task of creating more affirmative scripts for interraciality. It is in the spirit of this work that I examine the representation of interracial families on film. While aiming to stay alert to ways such representations may recycle racist scenarios, my goal is to see whether there is material here with which to envision more equitable relations between blacks and whites across the unnatural chasm of the racial divide.

Although this essay will focus on film, I begin with the Monticello affair because it suggests why the family is such an explosive site for the exploration of race issues. Specifically the Monticello case points to three aspects of the family as an ideological entity: the family as a primary measure of social well-being, the interdependency of family and narrative, and the historical opposition between family values and race values.

The family trope

The reverberations of the Jefferson–Hemings story, especially the inclination to read this family affair as a comment on the state of democracy, points to the family's privileged status as the yardstick by which the quality of other social institutions is assessed. Jacques Donzolet refers to what has become 'an essential ritual of our societies to scrutinize the countenance of the family at regular intervals in order to decipher our destiny, glimpsing in the death of the family an impending return to barbarism, the letting go of our reasons for living'.⁹ In Roddey Reid's analysis of public discourse on the family, an even stronger claim is made. The family, he suggests, is regarded as the principal institution for 'keeping human beings human'.¹⁰ That is, our value as human beings is determined principally by our performance as family members. Reid traces this idea to the end of the eighteenth century, when people began to be judged less by their social rank and more by their fulfillment of familial responsibilities: 'The question was less "What is your station?" . . . but rather "What kind of father or mother are you?"'¹¹

The easy way in which family becomes a surrogate for 'humanity' is suggested by the predominance of family metaphors in new social movements. For the various men's movements of the 1990s, for example, creating a more acceptable form of masculinity meant inventing a more acceptable form of fatherhood. In the cinema, the quest for a gentler, kinder version of manhood produced numerous films in which action heroes learn the importance of paternal

- 9 Jacques Donzolet *The Policing of Families* (New York: Pantheon Books 1979) p. 4

- 10 Roddey Reid 'Death of the family or keeping human beings human' in Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston (eds) *Posthuman Bodies* (Bloomington: IN: Indiana University Press 1995)

- 11 *Ibid.* p. 187

12 Susan Jeffords 'Can masculinity be terminated?' in Steve Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (eds) *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Routledge 1993)

13 Of course the ironic assumption that mothers and sisters are treated better is symptomatic of how familial ideology functions to mask the violence within families

14 Kay Weston *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press 1991)

15 Michelle Barrett and Mary McIntosh *The Anti-Social Family* (New York: Verso 1982)

16 Paul Gilroy 'It's a family affair' in *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Culture* (New York: Serpent's Tail 1995)

values.¹² In everyday situations, too, we use familial language to encourage people to behave more humanely – for example, a woman objecting to a sexual slur may ask the offender whether he would like to see his mother or sister treated that way.¹³ Conversely, not having a family – or having the wrong kind – becomes a vehicle of dehumanization. As Kay Weston notes, the equation 'straight is to gay as family is to non-family' has long served as a means by which gays and lesbians are rendered less than human.¹⁴ Small wonder then that the stakes surrounding the family are extremely high when membership in the normative family qualifies you as a human being. Does this make a case for regarding the introduction of interracial families to the screen as an intrinsically progressive move for race relations? If the question 'would you want your daughter to marry one' has been a sticking point for racists, should recognition of interracial families be seen as a powerful countermove, the first step towards bringing down barriers in other areas of social life?

One problem with this idea is that as an ideological unit, the family is repeatedly imagined as divorced from social life, an oasis of intimacy in an unfriendly world. In a brilliant *exposé* of familial ideology, Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh explain how characterizing the family as the exclusive source of genuine emotion and caring, nurturing relationships works to 'suck the juice out of other institutions'.¹⁵ Making the nuclear family the primary model for human relationships succeeds not just in denigrating other kinds of family arrangements, but also in undermining other forms of sociality. The community, for example, becomes at best a weak imitation of the true and lasting bonds we are supposed to share with family members. In a similar vein, Paul Gilroy points to the problems associated with the popularity of the kinship trope in African-American political discourse.¹⁶ Conceiving of the black community as a family of 'brothers' and 'sisters' works to delegitimize other forms of political agency and association (strengthening the black public sphere, forging transnational solidarities, and so on), and too often supports claims that ending structural discrimination is a matter of reviving the black family.

The family acquires ideological force insofar as it seems to turn its back on other social institutions and can be clearly differentiated from them, retaining its status as a 'natural' and therefore privileged association predicated on the involuntary ties of blood. Yet to a significant degree, the family idealized by the discourse of family values is a narrative entity, constructed in opposition to the ties of blood. This becomes evident in considering what counts as a family.

The family circle

The idea that Jefferson had fathered Hemings's children had been a matter of family lore among Hemings's black descendants, preserved through oral narratives, necessarily, because slaves were forbidden to write. Confirmation of a DNA linkage provided support for the oral storyline, against the rival narrative of Jefferson's white descendants who had been able to draw on written documentation to back their version of the family tree. The Monticello affair reveals to what degree families are structures that are kept alive and maintained through stories rather than through blood ties. The shape of this particular family, how far it extended and whom it counted as members, depended very literally on whose story was heard and on which story received social support.

In some well-known lines written for the preface to *Roderick Hudson*, Henry James observes 'Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so'.¹⁷ James is here talking about the problems of narrative, of how in this, his first novel, he experienced the tussle between holding fast to his subject and 'the ache of fear, that was to become so familiar, of being unduly tempted and led on by "developments"' James attempts to resolve this problem by centring his novel in the consciousness of Rowland Mallett, so that 'this whole was to be the sum of what "happened" to him'.¹⁸

The strategy adopted by James to resolve the problem of narrative control is similar to the strategy used to solve the problem of kinship relations that really stop nowhere. Anglo-American culture draws the line tightly around a core nuclear unit centred on the father, cutting off more distant kin and designating this small configuration above all others as necessary to individual and social health. Not only is the nuclear family an arbitrary selection from a larger web of blood connections, it is also a unit frequently constructed in opposition to blood relations. Adoption agencies for example, often prefer to place a child with an unrelated set of parents rather than allowing the child to live with members of the extended family, revealing a preference for something that looks like a nuclear family over actual blood ties.¹⁹ As is well documented, families that do not look nuclear – families headed by a single woman, for example – are considered dangerous and disorderly places to raise children, despite the presence of a blood tie. The foundations of the nuclear family are forged out of stories and images, not blood. In her discussion of photography, Susan Sontag observes that parents who do not take pictures of their children are likely to be perceived as inadequate, even unloving parents.²⁰ Similarly, the breaking of a family tie may be signalled by the name that is never mentioned at dinner, the torn wedding photo, the picture excised from the family album. More

17 Henry James *Roderick Hudson* (1909) (New York: Harper, 1960) p. xli

18 *Ibid.* p. li

19 Barrett and McIntosh *The Anti-Social Family*

20 Susan Sontag *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1977)

than other institutions, the family relies heavily upon its self-representations to stay alive. But the most dramatic example of how little blood matters to the construction of families is the historic opposition between family and race. The line that encircles the nuclear unit, separating off extended relations and dividing family from nonfamily, is also, crucially, a colour line.

Race versus the family

21 Werner Sollors *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 1997)

In a study of interracial literature, Werner Sollors traces the opposition between race and the family to the racial technology developed to support slavery.²¹ The prescription of slave status for anyone with a black ancestor, irrespective of the presence of white relatives, allowed racial ancestry to overrule kinship, bringing these two institutions into conflict. The enforcement of a colour line between free whites and subhuman blacks was a line that would cut through the ties of family in the event of interracial unions. White slave owners who fathered children with black women created 'shadow families' of mulatto relatives who could not be acknowledged as kin. If race could erase portions of the family tree, causing close kin to disappear from view because they were the wrong colour, it could also reveal familial relations where none were presumed to exist. A popular theme of interracial literature involved the birth of a black child to white parents. Like a flame that passes over the page to reveal lines of invisible writing, the birth of a black child subverts the official family narrative, pointing to the presence of unknown black grandfathers, or giving rise to the suspicion of extramarital affairs.

The themes that Sollors isolates in abolitionist literature clarify how much the opposition to slavery was rooted in the perception of the way that slavery endangered the family. A favourite storyline in abolitionist literature featured the villainous white patriarch who bred and sold mulatto children for profit, violating the sacred bonds between parents and children. The discovery of unwitting incest, another favoured plot device, served as a warning to supporters of slavery that the colour line was a threat to the sexual sanctity of the family, increasing the risk that whites would commit incest with the half-white brothers, sisters and daughters they did not know they possessed.

Ironically, as Sollors points out, the colour line also threatened patriarchy. Because slave status depended on maternal descent, white men could not pass on their name or inheritance to their mulatto sons, hence interfering in the normal transmission of property that the institution of marriage and family was designed to accomplish. In another way, too, race acted to disrupt the hierarchies of power that governed the nuclear family. The birth of a dusky child to white

parents was an immediate source of information on the separate contributions of father and mother to a child. Racial complexion thus challenged the subordination of female identity to patriarchy by providing visible testimony of the importance of both parents to the production of offspring.²²

In history and in fiction, the exclusion of racial difference from the family narrative makes race into the family's worst enemy, undermining patriarchal control, subverting the orderly distribution of power within the family, registering the presence of forces and relations both outside and inside the family that distract from the orderly succession of father to son. The opposition of race and family continues to mark contemporary debates on racial issues, although now the pressure to deny family members out of loyalty to one's racial community is as likely to come from blacks as from whites. When, for example, the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People called upon biracial individuals in the USA to identify themselves as African-American on the 2000 Census, they were requiring that race should trump family; that what was owed to white family members should be suppressed in favour of allegiance to the black community. Conversely, when advocates of transracial adoption recommend that black children should be placed with white families when no black family is available, they presume that family trumps race – that the value of living in a family outweighs the value of contacts with one's racial heritage.²³

²³ Janet Farrell Smith 'Analyzing ethical conflict in the transracial adoption debate: three conflicts involving community' *Hypatia* vol 11 no 2 (1996) pp 1–33

The tension between race and family is a pervasive presence in the films discussed here. In the first two films, a white man comes into contact with his 'shadow family' and undergoes a personal transformation as a result. Although these two films ostensibly celebrate an antiracist perspective, the perception of the family as the private property of a white patriarch turns the interracial family into a device for rejuvenating white male authority at the expense of black men. Family functions in these films as the outer boundary of racial progress, drawing a line between what can be accomplished in personal relationships and the supposedly irresolvable racial tensions of the public sphere. In the second two films, race interferes more productively with our notions of what constitutes a family, inviting reflection on what families are for, why they are dangerous, and how the tension between race and family loyalties might be renegotiated.

White fathers, black donors

The plot of *Made in America* turns on the discovery by Zorah, a black high school student, that her mother gave birth to her through a sperm donor. A visit to the sperm bank produces the information that Zorah's biological father is a white car salesman called Hal (Ted

Whoopi and the Marlboro Man.
Hal Jackson (Ted Danson) and
Sarah Mathews (Whoopi
Goldberg). *Made in America*
 (Richard Benjamin, 1993).
 Picture courtesy: BFI Stills.



Danson). The news horrifies Zorah and her mother Sarah (Whoopi Goldberg), both highly educated, professional women. Zorah, a gifted science student, has by the close of the film won a scholarship to MIT, Sarah runs a store in Berkeley specializing in African books and artefacts. Following the discovery, both Zorah and her mother make several inexplicable visits to Hal's truck emporium, inexplicable because Hal would seem a poor object for their enthusiasm. As a salesman of all-American trucks, Hal looks like a Marlboro man gone to seed. His job consists of dressing up in gaudy cowboy gear to participate in television commercials featuring circus animals. Zorah is nonetheless keen to claim him. The pull of biological ties is, we are led to believe, sufficient to override racial and class differences.

Hal offers us an image of a white male icon depleted and reduced by the marketplace into a commercial joke. We first encounter Hal lying in bed exhausted after a vigorous bout of lovemaking with his girlfriend, a fanatic aerobics instructor. Commercially Hal is not doing well either. His girlfriend suggests that he start another enterprise, marketing classical violin music with a rap beat, because rap, unlike the white-identified classical music, is big business. The title of the film, *Made in America*, continues the theme of commerce by alluding to a product, and the product most obviously declining in value is Hal, whose name has become part of a cheesy slogan to sell his All-American trucks ('Hal's your pal!'). The thrust of the film is to give Hal back his name, by elevating him to the more respectable position of fatherhood. As Hal's interest in his biological daughter grows, and as he forms a relationship with Sarah, he cleans up his act, throwing out the junk food, pouring away the whisky and giving up cigarettes. In the final scene of the film, when Zorah accepts her

scholarship at a graduation ceremony, Hal receives public affirmation of his role as father by Zorah in front of a jubilant crowd.

However, the title of the film also refers to Zorah's conception. She was not born but *made* in a test tube with sperm bought from a *bank*. The narrative of the film works to rewrite her origins and to remove the taint of the marketplace from the family by restoring to Zorah a father who falls conveniently in love with her mother. It is no coincidence that each time Zorah and Sarah visit Hal's truck emporium they interrupt a financial transaction. On her first trip, Zorah causes havoc in the commercial that Hal is shooting with a bear. After Zorah's visit, Sarah arrives to disrupt a commercial that Hal is shooting with an elephant. The entrance of kin is in this way staged to interfere with profit, underlining the sacred, noncommercial status of family relations.

Whereas Hal is rejuvenated by finding his lost family, the effects on the black women are damaging. The rehabilitation of Hal requires that he be given back not only his name but also his patriarchal authority. And this means curtailing, symbolically, the freedom of the black woman whose choice of a sperm bank threatens to sideline the contributions of men to procreation. Sarah begins the film as an independent, politically aware black woman, riding her bicycle through the lively multicultural streets of Berkeley to her store, *The African Queen*. By the end of the film she is on crutches. As Hal cleans up his act we watch Sarah get drunk, crash her bicycle and eventually end up in hospital, affording Hal the opportunity to step into the role of provider. The restoration of the family diminishes the woman – after Sarah becomes involved with Marlboro Man Hal she is increasingly featured in the home, engaged in domestic tasks such as sewing.

Meanwhile Hal's paternal responsibilities towards his putative daughter appear to consist largely in protecting her sexuality. Zorah's sexual vulnerability is accordingly overemphasized to spell out the need for a paternal protector. She has a date with a Latino man that ends in an attempted seduction, but because the Latino is Hal's employee we are assured that she can be protected from him. Even in hospital a black doctor gratuitously remarks that Zorah is 'hot', giving Hal the opportunity to assert himself as her father and silence the doctor.

The unpleasant spectacle of a white man assuming paternal rights at the expense of nonwhite men cast as sexual predators is foreshadowed early on in the film during the visit to the sperm bank. While Zorah attempts to gain access to the computer records, we glimpse a heavy-set muscular black man leaving down the corridor after having made an apparently successful donation of sperm. Immediately following this scene we are introduced to Hal as a middle-aged man exhausted from the physical effort of satisfying his young girlfriend. The pairing of these scenes institutes a hierarchy

between black men who furnish the biological materials for family and white men who, not able to compete sexually, are nonetheless presented as the best candidates for fatherhood. To ensure that this contest is no contest, the only black men featured in *Made in America* are either gay (Sarah's assistant at the store), feminized (Zorah's would-be boyfriend, the hapless T-cake) or dead (Sarah's first husband). In a plot twist at the end of the film we discover that the computer records were faulty and that Zorah's father is in fact black. But he remains anonymous, like the donor we glimpse at the sperm bank. The discovery does not prompt Zorah to initiate a new search. Instead, the film would have us believe that Hal has so successfully embodied paternity that the actual black father is unnecessary. The fiction of natural blood ties sufficient to override racial difference is exposed as a preference for something that looks like a family, a unit headed by a white man.

At a pivotal moment in the film, Hal is shown watching *The Little Princess* on television, the sentimental children's story in which Shirley Temple loses her father and finds a new one. As Hal watches the scene, he looks at a photo of Zorah. The substitution of a white daughter for a black one is revealing. Although *Made in America* would have us believe that family transcends racial difference, the care taken by the film to avoid interracial sex suggests that race matters enormously. There are three moments in the film when the possibility of interracial sex is explicitly disavowed. The first is the mistake made by the sperm bank in using a white donor for a black woman's conception, a mistake that turns out not to have been made. The second occurs during Hal's first encounter with Zorah and before he knows that she may be his daughter. Hal has trouble with the zipper in his pants and Zorah kneels down to help him. The frightened face of the secretary who catches them in this position gives the audience the chance to confuse shock at the sight of fellatio with shock at the sight of a mixed race couple. Furthermore, since the audience believes that Zorah is Hal's daughter, the spectre of incest offers another reason to justify discomfort with this scene and motivates the desire to see Hal publicly acknowledged as Zorah's father. The third way in which this film denies the interraciality that it ostensibly embraces is through the casting of Whoopi Goldberg. As Tania Modleski has observed, the career of this actress on screen is marked by a certain gender ambiguity, reinforced by the number of films in which she is literally or metaphorically substituting for a man (for example, *Jumpin' Jack Flash* [Penny Marshall, 1986], *Ghost* [Jerry Zucker, 1990] and *The Associate* [Donald Petrie, 1996]).²⁴ In other films, Goldberg plays the nanny whose task is to nurse the white boy (*Clara's Heart* [Robert Mulligan, 1988]) or the white man (*Corrinna, Corrinna* [Jessie Nelson, 1994]) through trauma. The choice of Whoopi Goldberg as the romantic partner for Ted Danson, best known as the infantile

24 Tania Modleski *Feminism Without Women* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

25 The only romantic encounter between Sarah and Hal is played for laughs and conveniently interrupted by the return of her daughter

Sam from the television comedy *Cheers* (Paramount, tx 1982–93), may suggest the degree to which her desexualized persona and her reputation as a comic provides a safety net for the audience, insulating them from having to accept that anything sexual will ever take place²⁵

The construction of the interracial family as a defence against racial difference and as a refuge for white men is particularly evident in *A Family Thing*. Earl (Robert Duvall) runs a hardware store in Arkansas. Following the death of his mother he discovers that his real mother was a black maid coerced into sex by his father. The discovery effectively deprives Earl of his rights to white masculinity and it will be the task of the film to restore him to his former status. When Earl journeys to Chicago to meet his black half-brother Ray (James Earl Jones), he suffers a series of humiliations that emphasize his fall from grace. He is beaten up by a group of young black men, stripped of his wallet (and identity), thrown out of a bar when seen to be bothering a black family, and ultimately spends a night sleeping with the homeless under a bridge. Earl's vulnerability in the city streets is repeatedly contrasted with the superior urban know-how of Ray, a policeman working in downtown Chicago. Once again the interracial family offers the white man a means of rehabilitation and a way to prevail in these racial rivalries. As Earl takes refuge from the dangerous streets by staying with Ray and his family, he gradually replaces his black brother as the head of the household by taking over paternal responsibilities for Ray's troubled son Virgil. The transfer of fathers is captured in a scene in which Earl dispenses paternal advice to Virgil on how to put his life back together (advice given, significantly, in the form of a story about a man who adopted a son). Once more a family thing becomes a male thing – Earl's trip to Chicago to see Ray begins with the death of his white mother, and ends at the grave of his black biological mother, the two men bonding as they gaze at her tombstone. And by emphasizing the family as a haven from the racial tensions of the public sphere, the film makes the interracial family anti-social, as the exceptional and only place where racial tensions can be resolved (in favour of white men), not the first step towards remaking race relations in society.

Made in America and *A Family Thing* are classical Hollywood narratives. The problem of a racial transgression that upsets race and gender hierarchies prompts a quest for order that is successfully completed by the restoration of the family unit. The two films considered in the next section turn this equation on its head, making family the problem, not the solution to questions of race. More formally complex, both *Six Degrees of Separation* and *Smoke* disturb temporal continuities to challenge the orderly succession of generations that is part of the official understanding of how families are meant to work. Both films take the act of narration as their subject. The characters of these films borrow, steal and trade stories

in order to secure a place in a variety of relational configurations, making explicit the connection between making families and telling stories and questioning the inevitability of the nuclear master plot. In *Six Degrees* and *Smoke*, relations really stop nowhere, an idea that invites us to consider the dangers of making families such exclusive enclosures and to ask whether crossing the colour line might entail breaching the family circle.

White parents, black sons

Six Degrees of Separation relates the story of a young black man, Paul (Will Smith), who inveigles his way into the homes of rich white families by pretending to be the son of Sydney Poitier. The first home we see him entering belongs to an art dealer and his wife, Flan and Ouisa Kittredge (Donald Sutherland and Stockard Channing), who narrate the story piece by piece to various sets of people in their elite social circle. The story, as they tell it, begins one evening in their New York apartment. The Kittredges are playing host to a rich white South African, Jeffrey, hoping that he will lend them two million dollars for a deal that Flan is brokering to buy a Cezanne. When the talk turns to the prospect of a visit to South Africa, the Kittredges trade quips about the racial privileges



Paul Poitier comes to dinner,
Flan Kittredge (Donald
Sutherland), Ouisa Kittredge
(Stockard Channing) and
Paul Poitier (Will Smith).
Six Degrees of Separation
(Fred Schepisi, 1993). Picture
courtesy: BFI Stills.

they enjoy – the problems of talking about oppressed blacks from a comfortable penthouse on the East Side. Already in these remarks there is a hint of the liberal guilt that this film will exploit. If they went to South Africa, Ouisa remarks, they would see only what they expected to see – the poor suffering blacks, a tourist's view of apartheid. The desire for 'real' difference appears to be answered when a young black man bursts in, claiming to be a friend of their children, the son of Sydney Poitier, and the victim of a street mugging which has caused him to seek the help of the Kittredge couple. Just how much 'difference' the Kittredges are capable of tolerating is a question raised by the film's careful choreography of this arrival. Flan and his financier are admiring a print of the Cezanne painting. We see a closeup of the painting as Flan rhapsodizes on Cezanne's artistry in making a burst of colour 'carry the weight of the whole picture'. Gradually the painting goes out of focus, and as it is lowered, the camera refocuses on Paul standing behind it, framed in the doorway supported by the doorman and Ouisa. The timing of Paul's entrance to coincide with Flan's discussion of colour instructs us in the superficiality of Flan's understanding of racial difference and in the aesthetic appreciation that will dominate his responses to Paul. As the explanations begin, the camera cuts to a long shot in which the two groups, Flan and the financier at one end, his wife with Paul and the doorman at the other, appear to be standing at a great distance from one another. The separation of the wealthy white men from those who too often depend on them is a subtle reminder of the true chasm that such superficial good intentions will never cross.

Throughout the evening, 'Paul Poitier' charms his hosts. Dressed in preppy clothes, he cooks them an exquisite dinner, alludes to a childhood in Switzerland, offers them parts in his father's new movie of *Cats*, and concludes with a rendition of his thesis on the subject of J.D. Salinger's book *Catcher in the Rye*, discoursing so eloquently on the debasement of the imagination in modern literature that he moves Flan to tears. Next morning, Ouisa discovers Paul in bed with a white male hustler and in panic and anger the Kittredges eject him from the apartment. As the plot unfolds, the Kittredges discover they are not the only ones to have been romanced by Paul: another white couple has played host to the son of Poitier, and subsequently they meet a third victim, a white Jewish doctor who also invited Paul home believing that he was a friend of his son.

Paul enters the lives of these white families as the perfect son, everything that their own children are not. When the Kittredges team up with Paul's other victims to solve the mystery of Paul's visits, we are treated to multiple scenes of vituperative family quarrels. Each of the couples we meet is locked into a bitter battle with their children. The Kittredge children rage and snarl at their parents. The doctor's son taunts his father for his stupidity, his lack of virility and his

divorce. 'Your father was right, you are a fool!' screams the waitress at her boyfriend, the last couple that Paul visits and charms. Paul with his deference, his polished manners, his intelligence and his eagerness to learn about art is very obviously the son that Flan does not have – that no-one has. Significantly, after his visit to the Kittredge couple Paul changes his act and begins to pass himself off as Flan Kittredge's illegitimate black son. The film offers us other signs of Paul's symbolic filial status. In a dream that Ouisa narrates, she sees Paul outside her bedroom window, inflicting a wound on his side that echoes the figure of Jesus, the ultimate ideal son. Finally, as the unexpected guest at the Kittredge dinner party, Paul mimics the most famous role of the man he claims as father, the role of talented son-in-law to white parents played by Sydney Poitier in *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner* (Stanley Kramer, 1967).

The battle for power between parents and children finds an analogy in the unraveling of narrative authority. The Kittredges are the chief narrators of these events, but they are not in control of the story they tell, any more than they can control their children. The first discovery that the Kittredges make is that their encounter is part of a larger plot that started earlier, they are merely second-to-last in the sequence of Paul's impersonations. And what they discover about the origins of this masquerade presents a further challenge to both familial and narrative hierarchy. Enlisting the help of their children, the Kittredges track down a white gay man, Trent Conway, who was a friend of their children at boarding school. It was Trent who picked Paul up in the street and, in an attack of Pygmalion fever, made him over, teaching him how to talk, how to act among the rich and sharing with him information about his friends and their families in return for sexual favours. In a sense the story that the Kittredges tell of meeting the son of Sydney Poitier was authored by their children, who passed it on to their friend, Trent, who created the Paul Poitier who arrived to rock the house that Flan built. 'You have no secrets', Paul tells Ouisa on the phone – her children have told them all.

The degree to which the Kittredges are part of a larger plot that exceeds their narrative grasp is foregrounded in the flashbacks that are woven into their story. For example, their account of the evening of Paul's visit is interspersed with scenes of Paul rehearsing his performance to the gay man who picked him up, emphasizing that the stories Paul tells them are the product of stories he was told, just as his eloquent discourse on Salinger turns out to be borrowed from a commencement address at Groton. However, if the story that the Kittredges tell is part of a larger network of narratives, crossing class and age lines, this larger narrative stops abruptly at the racial borders. What nobody in the film can discover is Paul's real name and background. Paul enters the film as a white fiction, the product of the white gay man who worked the makeover. His own

26 Compare *Secrets and Lies* in which the discovery of a black daughter similarly exposes the wounds festering in a white working-class family resulting in a triumphant celebration of communication within the family. However, although many secrets are revealed, the black woman's origins remain a mystery – her mother refuses to tell her about her father, hinting at horrors that permit the reemergence of the stereotype of the black rapist and the nuclear family doors swing shut once again.

background and origins remain hidden.²⁶ What the Kittredges see in Paul is an image that was tailored to their specifications, calculated to appeal to them on the basis of what Trent knew from their own children. The film thus draws the family circle tight again, so that the black man becomes a white invention, a story authored by the Kittredge children and handed on through various mediators. When the Kittredges think they are reaching out to help a young black man, they are merely responding to a reflection that they themselves produce. The proliferating narrators and expanding stories remain locked within a racially homogenous family circle. It is this claustrophobic reduction of families that the film works to uncover and oppose.

Paul's exclusion from the family narrative is dramatized by his ending. Like his origins, the story of what happens to Paul in the end eludes the film's narration. Having promised to help him and to treat him as her son, Ouisa agrees to accompany Paul to the police. But she arrives too late and Paul disappears into the criminal justice system. As Ouisa trudges from precinct to precinct, she is told she cannot track Paul because she does not know his name and 'he is not family'. Paul's story remains in darkness, outside the incestuous inbreeding of stories in *Six Degrees*. Family becomes emblematic of the chasm existing between white and black worlds, a mechanism for keeping racial difference out. By the end of the film Ouisa is voicing her dissatisfaction with both her stories and her family.

Throughout *Six Degrees* our attention is drawn to the disjuncture between the act of narration and the events that are to be narrated. The film shifts between two and sometimes three time-zones, using flashbacks to shuttle us back and forth between the events that happened to the Kittredges, their account of these events to various acquaintances, and Paul's rehearsals with Trent. The foregrounding of the act of narration accomplishes two things. First, it emphasizes that Paul is a fictional creation of white people meant to serve their own interests. The tale of Paul Poitier is a story on which the Kittredges dine out and which increases their value at the social functions integral to Flan's business as an art dealer. This is one of the accusations that Ouisa hurls at Flan in the film's denouement. Having been invited to once more sing for their supper, Ouisa reproaches herself and Flan for the way they have packaged and sold Paul as a story: 'And we turned him into an anecdote to dine out on . . . have we become these human jukeboxes spilling out these anecdotes?' The Kittredges are not the only culprits in this regard. In the flashbacks to Paul's rehearsals he stares directly into the camera while he practises his story and begins to take off his clothing. Trent remains out of frame, his presence in that room not revealed until much later. Paul's seductive routine is thus aimed at the offscreen audience as well as the wealthy couples he targets, a move that may encourage some viewers of this film to reflect on their own

27 The casting of Will Smith cannily exploits extracinematic material here. At the time, Smith was defending himself from accusations of being too white based on his transition from urban rapper to the star of the hit television sitcom *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (where he plays a black man who goes to live with his wealthy relatives). These are accusations that Sydney Portier before him had also fielded. David Ritz, 'Will power', *Essence*, February 1993.

complicity in accepting racial difference when it comes in forms that are palatable to whites.²⁷

The second thing accomplished by the separation of tale from teller is to highlight the discrepancy between where the Kittredges begin their story and where the film chooses to begin. The Kittredge story follows the order of their discoveries, starting with their evening playing host to Jeffrey and their gradual discovery of the larger story of which they are a part. The film, conversely, opens on a scene of panic. The Kittredges are rushing around their apartment, crying out that they could have been killed, frantically checking to see whether any of their most valuable art possessions have been stolen. Only later do we learn that these moments of chaos are the result of discovering Paul in bed with a white hustler. The opening of the film thus grants an originary force to the revelation that Paul is gay. Moreover, the scene in which Ouisa goes to wake Paul, hears the sounds of lovemaking as she approaches the bedroom door, and shrieks at the sight of Paul in the arms of a white man – this scene plays very much like a primal scene. However, not only is the order of the primal scene inverted – it is a parent who happens on the lovemaking of a man in her son's bedroom – but the substitution of homosexual for heterosexual copulation rattles the entire structure of the nuclear family. The film invokes homosexual couplings twice more. The last couple that Paul visits, a pair of young would-be actors, is an affair that ends tragically when Paul seduces the young man who later commits suicide. During the final dinner party, Ouisa again evokes a homoerotic dimension, accusing her husband Flan of being attracted to Paul. Although her words are ambiguous, Flan's immediate and abrupt denial ('Oh please, cut me out of that pathology right now') successfully allows the homosexual dimension to emerge as a latent possibility.

What Paul brings to the Kittredge couple is the potential for relations outside the airless box of the family structure. 'There was colour in my life', Ouisa mourns at the end, and her words recall the careful rhyming of Paul's arrival in the Kittredge home with the discussion of colour in the Cézanne painting. As 'coloured man' and as gay man, Paul occupies an extrafamilial position. The image of a black and a white man embracing powerfully summons up that alternative American love story described by Leslie Fiedler, in which the American hero departs family and civilization to find redemption in the arms of a black man.²⁸ The relegation of black and white unions to the wilderness reflects an inability to imagine anything beyond the family. This inability is represented in the Kittredge's prize possession – a double-sided Kandinsky, one side showing geometric precision, the other, abstract chaos. There are apparently only two options, either the excruciating claustrophobia of the ordered white family, or the chaos imagined to occur when race and sexual difference are allowed in, nothing in between.

28 Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Dell, 1969).

In *Six Degrees*, the entrance of a black man into the closely-knit world of upper-class whites acts like a stone flung into a pond. Although the ripples spread and widen to encompass more and more people, the pattern they create monotonously repeats itself, demonstrating the difficulties of breaking out of the family circle. The eager adoption of Paul by this succession of white couples points to a yearning for an alternative to the nuclear family. But while *Six Degrees* lays bare the dysfunction of these families and the tight and ultimately degenerate insularity of the world they produce, it can only gesture towards what might lie beyond.

Reinventing the family: *Smoke*

A white man meanders along a sidewalk in New York. Colours are drab, washed-out and the air is dense with the haze of a hot summer in the city. As the man steps off the pavement a black hand reaches into the frame like the hand of fate and pulls him out of the path of an approaching truck. The camera pauses for the barest instant on the two men, one black, one white, lying on the ground and then cuts quickly to the aftermath, as the white man earnestly asks if he can buy his rescuer a cup of coffee to 'balance the scales'. This scene from early in the film *Smoke* suggests the similarities between *Smoke* and *Six Degrees* as well as some of the more crucial differences. Both films have plots centred on fortuitous connections forged between strangers as the result of an encounter with a young black man. The white man in the scene described above is a middle-aged writer called Paul Benjamin (William Hurt). Like Paul Poitier in *Six Degrees*, the arrival of a young black man, Rashid Cole (Harold



Paul Benjamin (William Hurt) meets Rashid Cole (Harold Perrineau). *Smoke* (Wayne Wang, 1995). Picture courtesy: BFI Stills.

Perrineau), injects 'colour' and 'vitality' into the lives of the white characters. Once Rashid moves into Benjamin's apartment, the seedy browns and off-whites that have dominated the colour scheme until now are replaced with dark, rich reds, greens, and the dazzling light of early morning sunshine coming through the apartment bay window. However, there the resemblances end, for there is a significant tonal difference in the way that *Smoke* handles quite similar material. Whereas *Six Degrees* inhabits a hyperemotional terrain, punctuating the action with heated outbursts and intense confrontations, the interactions in *Smoke* are more muted. Confrontations are rare, and when a moment of drama occurs, as in the narrowly avoided accident described above, it is over almost before it begins, quietly allowed to fizzle out or dwindle into a cup of coffee in a cafe. This shift in tone is indicative of where the film locates itself – somewhere in-between the overwrought, pressured intimacies of the nuclear family and the lighter, more casual emotions we reserve for strangers on the street. The temporal structure of the film helps to locate it in everyday life. Although *Smoke* follows a roughly linear chronology, the division of the film into five sections, each named after one of the five major characters, pulls against the forward movement of the narrative. Furthermore, the absence of clear demarcations in time, the blending of days and weeks, and the looping of certain incidents that recur in the characters' lives effectively capture the mix of routine and invention that characterizes the rhythms of the everyday. The sense we have throughout *Smoke* of associations formed by chance, relationships subject to the vagaries of time, place and good fortune, is strengthened by the camera movements. Using mostly long takes, the camera approaches its characters from lovely oblique angles. Frequently the characters are positioned at an angle to one another, just slightly off the axis of action, creating the sense of connections that are tenuous and contingent and that could easily have been missed. By such means *Smoke* permits more complex and open-ended versions of family to emerge.

The world to which *Smoke* introduces us initially is cluttered with the debris of family disasters. Each of the five main characters whose stories are interwoven bears wounds from disintegrating families. Benjamin is a writer who has had trouble completing a novel since the death of his pregnant wife in a street shoot-out. Rashid's mother is dead and his father, Cyrus, abandoned him at the age of eight. When Rashid locates Cyrus at a run-down garage outside the city, he finds a man who has a hook for a left arm as a reminder of the car crash that killed his wife. Perhaps the happiest character is Augie, owner of the small corner store in New York which acts as the hub of the wheel around which these characters revolve. But Augie, too, will come face to face with family wreckage when he receives a visit from Ruby, an old girlfriend who informs

Augie that he may be the father of a drug addict who has just had an abortion

Each of the characters in *Smoke* is immobilized by their family troubles. Benjamin has writer's block, Augie's hobby is taking pictures of the street corner outside his store, every day at the same time, a powerful suggestion of creativity trapped and penned by routine. Ruby and Cyrus carry permanent marks of former failures in the exaggerated disfigurements of their body – a black patch for an eye, a hook for an arm. Of all these characters, only Rashid seems in motion, his restless state marked by the three name changes he undergoes through the film. At their first meeting, the young black man introduces himself to Benjamin as Rashid Cole. His aunt reintroduces him as 'Thomas Jefferson Cole' who has run away from home after hearing that his father has been spotted. And when Rashid finds his father he shifts again, introducing himself this time as 'Paul Benjamin'. The three names with their overdetermined intimations of fatherhood – black fathers, white fathers, founding fathers – seem to suspend Rashid between black worlds and white worlds like a floating signifier in search of an anchor.

Rashid's role in this film carries the sense of liminality that Bill Nichols associates with the portrayal of sons in the cinema.²⁹ In search of an image of acceptable, non-patriarchal masculinity, Nichols finds potential in the young son who hovers on the point of maturity. He is, in Nichols's view, one of film's more empathetic visions of masculinity, because he is so often shown as poised between the genders, uncertain whether to accept the Law of the Father or to retain his allegiance to the more feminine attributes of relationship and nurturing. It would be tempting to see Rashid as similarly confronting a choice not between genders, but between races, between his black father Cyrus and Benjamin, the white man who becomes his substitute father. It is Benjamin who takes Rashid in after their chance encounter in the street, giving him a place to stay, and it is Benjamin's name that Rashid takes when confronting his biological father. After Rashid sees no room for himself in Cyrus's new family, he returns to his writer friend, bringing with him a television so that Benjamin and Rashid can sit together watching baseball and smoking cigars, a paradigmatic scene of father-son bonding. And when the gang members who are chasing Rashid visit Benjamin's apartment and beat him up, the writer emerges with his left arm in a sling in a muted echo of the wound that Rashid's black father incurred, as though to signal Benjamin's acceptance of symbolic fatherhood to Rashid. Does *Smoke* then return us to that racist familial narrative in which white men teach the rules of patriarchy to black men, graciously allow them into the family in the subordinate position of admiring sons?

There are in fact several interesting inversions in *Smoke* that mitigate against such a reading. Is Rashid Benjamin's symbolic son,

²⁹ Bill Nichols 'Sons at the brink of manhood: utopian moments in male subjectivity' *East-West Film Journal* vol. 4, no. 1 (1989) pp. 27–43

or is he Benjamin's symbolic father? At one point Benjamin tells Rashid a story that shakes our certainty about the placement of these characters in the family hierarchy. The story concerns a man who goes skiing and is caught by an avalanche, suffocating under the snow. Years later the man's son comes across the body of his father perfectly preserved under the ice, so perfectly that the son is now older than his father. In the following scene Rashid playfully takes up this story when he introduces himself to a woman in the bookstore as Benjamin's father. The story of the man preserved in the ice under snow may refer us to Benjamin's life. He is also iced-in, unable to move forward with his writing or away from the death of his wife, a state from which the encounter with Rashid rescues him. The story is told in the manner of a father passing on what he knows to his son, but the story itself also suggests the viewpoint of a son, imaging the subtle shifts in power that occur in families as children come to feel older than their parents and the gifts of nurture, advice and material support begin to flow in the opposite direction. In this moment, *Smoke* invites us to see family as a dynamic structure in which power is flexible and the order of membership shifts as the family unit ages.

The inversion of hierarchical relationships across racial lines is built into the narrative structure of *Smoke*, which, like *Six Degrees*, spins a web of accidental connections to link its main characters. Consider the trail of money that brings the protagonists of *Smoke* together. Rashid is on the run, he witnessed a robbery and picked up the money dropped by one of the thieves, a member of a black gang which is now pursuing him. Through Benjamin, Rashid finds a job in Augie's cigar store where he accidentally destroys a case of cigars that Augie had illegally imported from Cuba. Rashid gives Augie the money to pay for the cigars and Augie gives the money to his old girlfriend Ruby, a gift that helps to offset the tensions and injuries of their past relationship. Money that began as stolen goods is gradually laundered through these exchanges until it becomes a gift signalling affection. Even when Benjamin has his arm broken by the gang chasing Rashid, he jokes that he will use this incident in a story, making the medical expenses tax-deductible and bringing the chain of gifts full circle.

This complicated pattern of exchanges, debts, thefts and gifts is repeated at the end of the film. Benjamin has been commissioned by the *New York Times* to write a Christmas story and Augie tells him a story that begins very much like Rashid's. This time it is Augie, running after a young black boy who stole from his store, who picks up something the thief dropped, which turns out to be his wallet. Augie's anger is softened by the family photos he finds in the wallet and he decides to return it to an address in the projects on Christmas Day. There he meets Ethel, the boy's black grandmother, who appears to mistake Augie for her grandson because she is blind.

Augie falls in with the deception. 'It was as if', he says, 'we both decided to play this game, without having to discuss the rules. I mean, she knew I wasn't her grandson. . . but it made her happy to pretend.' He purchases some food and they have Christmas dinner together. In the old woman's bathroom Augie finds a stack of new cameras, probably stolen, one of which he steals. His theft will then become the story that he gives to Benjamin to write for the *New York Times*. The parallels with Rashid's story cannot be missed. If Rashid's encounter with thieves led him to Benjamin, whose son he pretended to be, Augie's encounter with a thief leads him to Ethel, whose grandson he pretends to be. Both stories involve numerous economic and affective transactions across the colour line, but so deliberately confusing are the transactions that it becomes difficult to sort out who is the creditor and who the debtor, who stole and who gave, since everyone steals and gives, incurring debts that cannot be calculated. Rashid is father and son to the white author Benjamin, he takes from him and also gives back, as Augie is grandson to a black woman Ethel and takes and gives back to her.

This is an apt account of both familial and narrative relations. Acts of 'relating' as Hillis Miller points out, whether through words or through relationships, 'incur an infinite debt which like that in all intimate, human relationships, can never be paid off'.³⁰ Throughout *Smoke* we find characters attempting to measure the value of things conventionally thought of as priceless. From Benjamin's initial story about attempts to measure the weight of smoke, through his attempts to 'balance the scales' and thank Rashid for saving his life, through the bargains that Rashid strikes with his biological father over the price of a drawing, and his no less complex gift of a television to Benjamin, the network of familial relationships is mixed up with the economy of value in a way that prevents us from consigning the family to some mythic realm separate from commerce.

At the conceptual core of this film are the photographs that Augie takes each morning at eight o'clock of the corner in front of his store. The photographs are in black and white and they include any people who happen to be passing by at that particular time. They are of course photographs that – we learn by the end of the film – were taken with the camera that Augie stole from the black woman Ethel. The importance of these photographs is signalled by a temporary interruption of the narrative during the scene in which Augie shows his photographs to Benjamin. We are first shown these photographs from Benjamin's point of view, in medium-shot, and as inert pictures pasted onto a page they look as uninteresting as he declares them to be. The camera then cuts to a closeup, allowing the contents of the photograph to fill the screen, and a series of beautiful dissolves moves us from one photograph to the next, endowing the still photo with movement and depth and taking us momentarily out of the diegesis. This movement out of the film is reinforced by the only

30 J. Hillis Miller, 'The two relativisms: point of view and indeterminacy in the novel *Absalom Absalom!*', in B.J. Crage (ed.), *Relativism in the Arts* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1983), pp. 163–4.

other occasion in which the director uses black and white, namely the reenactment of Augie's story about how he obtained the camera, shown at the end of the film to accompany the credits. In guiding us out of the diegesis, the photos comment self-reflexively on the operation of the film as a whole. Like the people who appear in Augie's photographs by chance as they pass by a street corner at a particular hour of the day, the people who make up the interracial family of *Smoke* are linked by chance encounters in a particular location. Augie's photographs, transformed into a living procession of people by the director's dissolves, reanimate the 'dead time' of everyday routines and furnish a model for the different kind of family that *Smoke* constructs. The number of people who pass by his store is not finite, no line can be drawn to fix this family in the frozen postures of a single portrait. Unlike the family album which turns its gaze inward, towards domestic interiors, Augie's album is filled with photos that look outward into public space, turning the family inside out to face the street. Indeed the possibility of distinguishing between public and private space is called into question when Augie shows his photographs to Benjamin. At first Benjamin is mystified, 'They're all the same', he says, until Augie tells him to look more closely. The camera zooms in for a closeup of a woman carrying an umbrella and this time Benjamin does see something: a picture of his deceased wife on her way to work, which causes him to break down in tears.³¹ The discovery of a personal connection among the anonymous strangers on the street is precisely the kind of connection that Augie's store facilitates. The store is located at the intersection between public and private, its boundaries metaphorically enlarged by Augie's photos of 'his' street corner. The store is a place of trade, but also the common ground where people come to find and remake their families.

31 Although the family conceived in *Smoke* is constructed along more generous lines than the white nuclear circle it is still an account of male bonds cemented across the bodies of absent women

Whereas in *Made in America* and *A Family Thing* race is used to pull the drawbridge up on the family in order to resuscitate white paternity, *Smoke* uses race to contest and undermine the frozen hierarchies of the nuclear family, loosening the stranglehold of the family circle. In this film we glimpse an idea of family where hierarchies are flexible and changing, where the lines between public and private responsibility are blurred, and where the complex intertwining of debts, thefts and gifts that takes place in the family becomes a way to imagine relations between whites and blacks beyond the punitive, zero-sum games of racial competition. *Smoke* offers us a vision of a thoroughly social family, one that might help to expand our imagination of what is possible in relationships that cross the colour line.

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To infinity and beyond: assessing the technological imperative in computer animation

JULIA MOSZKOWICZ

There exists a story concerning the first observational drawings made of the moon. The crude sketches of Thomas Harriot are compared to the relatively sophisticated representations produced by Galileo. Whilst both recordings were created at a similar time, commentators generally agree that the quality of Galileo's sketching effectively undermines the testimony provided by the former. Questions are raised as to the strength of the lenses. Surely Galileo's telescope was more powerful, for his drawings contain more detail? He presents mountains, a shaded undulating landscape, whilst Harriot can only reproduce the barest outline of the subject under scrutiny. Samuel Y. Edgerton, Jr has argued with some conviction, however, that the telescopes in question were of equivalent strength, so the only reasonable explanation for the difference between the visual recordings lie within the artistic backgrounds and skills of the scientists in question, and not their observational equipment.¹ It would appear that Galileo had a better understanding of contemporary developments in the arts. Indeed in his aspirations to render objects in three dimensions and utilize his knowledge of chiaroscuro, he came closer to our own conception of graphic realism than his unfortunate colleague. It is believed that he draws a different moon because he actually perceived and understood the moon differently from Harriot. Edgerton Jr believes that it was Galileo's training in chiaroscuro (an art mostly unknown in Harriot's England at the time) that led him to see mountains and craters where

¹ Samuel Y. Edgerton Jr. Galileo Florentine "disegno" and the "strange spottedness" of the moon. *Art Journal* vol 44 no 3 (1984) pp 225–32 also described in Adam Nieman's PhD thesis. URL <http://www.geocities.com/adamnieman>

Harriot only saw 'strange spottednesse'.² Unlikely as it may seem, I believe this holds a lesson for contemporary computer arts. For as Galileo benefited from the knowledges and ways of understanding the world which increasingly availed themselves to Renaissance Men, so practitioners today augment the awesome capabilities of the digital machine with knowledges and techniques drawn from wider discursive fields. At a time when the discussion around digital cinema, in particular, tends to surrender itself to a technophobic celebration of each incremental change in technical possibility, this essay offers a reminder of the need to question technologically determined and self-reflexive analyses of digital artefacts. When considering visual presentations in the virtual realm, whilst many choose to scrutinize the tool of vision itself (the computer interface/telescope) and its immediate precursors, it is becoming increasingly productive to explore the relationships which surround this tool and inform its pixillated vision. This essay makes some initial enquiries into the field of computer animation which *seems* to be characterized by new levels of graphic realism. Over the past few years the promise of visual enhancement has generated large audiences for computer-animation, particularly feature-length films, and it is the subject of popular criticism. I would argue, however, that a preoccupation with the digital spectacle is beginning to limit our understanding of the latest imaging technologies, and in particular, their diverse origins and concerns.

In film press there is a tendency to greet the release of computer-generated animations with excited rhetoric concerning the realistic nature of the digital enterprise. Attention is paid to the host of 'improvements' made to existing techniques in the field of computer-generated imagery (CGI), with reviews, in particular, comparing the current product with an appropriate antecedent. A *résumé* of the current state of play in CGI is also offered, with the rendering of human and organic life forms providing the ultimate benchmark of quality or veracity. Underlying this are assumptions about the progressive and linear nature of technological developments (each new software program is perceived as a step forward in this innovative field) with causal relationships established between the last computer program and the enhanced verisimilitude on offer. An online publication states of *Shrek* (Dreamworks/PDI, 2001) for instance

The animation is wonderful, making *Toy Story* look like the 'Money for Nothing' video.³

A similar tone is adopted for *Toy Story 2* (Pixar/Disney, 1999). Another online review suggests that:

Technically the film is even more amazing than *Toy Story* or *A Bug's Life*. Lately I've been dabbling a lot with the computerised

3 Ferret URL
<http://www.insideout.co.uk/film/s/shrek.shtml> p 1

landscape-generation program called *Terragen*, so the realism of modern computer graphics doesn't surprise me very much. To someone who hasn't any experience with the photorealistic results of a good computer drafting program, *Toy Story 2* will be doubly breathtaking.⁴

4 URL <http://www.geocities.com/d-patanela/toystory2.html> p. 1

However, while digital reproduction techniques are undeniably central to the provision of realistic finished products, as with the telescopic vision in the story of Galileo above, it would seem that diverse aesthetic techniques (and knowledges of the same) are becoming equally important to the spectacle of 'the real' in the digital realm – a development which challenges common sense about this newest of 'new media'. Indeed a shift seems to be taking place within CGI discourse, particularly amongst its practitioners, towards a renewed interest in the conceptual nature of images (and their underlying construction), in preference to the exploitation and privileging of pioneering programming techniques. Popular accounts of the medium have yet to account for this development, and are possibly being (mis)led by the production notes that accompany the distribution of animated products. These *may* be encouraging writers to interpret the films in a specifically techno-inflected way.

The current euphoria is not restricted to the occasional, yet quirky, online reviewer. In *The Daily Telegraph*, journalist Mark Monahan similarly heralds 'a second golden age of animation' and applauds the stunning realism in this computer-generated blockbuster.⁵ He places this product within a miniaturized history of digital animations, suggesting that *Shrek* has offered a hitherto unseen complexity in its use of CGI:

5 Mark Monahan 'Can you believe your eyes?' *The Daily Telegraph* Art and Books Supplement, 12 May 2001

Yet, if *Shrek* is the thematic equal of any of its forebears, it is on another level visually . . . When Shrek yells at Donkey, you can see individual hairs on the animal's face straining under the force of the ogre's breath; when Princess Fiona speaks, the corners of her mouth stick together almost imperceptibly before her lips part fully.⁶

6 *Ibid.* p. A9

The most impressive aspect of the film appears to lie in its mastery of mimesis, holding up a mirror to organic form and achieving a remarkable likeness. Most spectacularly, on this occasion, it has accorded a central role to a human form, that is, it has risked foregrounding the ultimate challenge to contemporary animators – that of recreating a living, breathing person. Monaghan continues

Although similar techniques were pioneered by the Disney/Pixar partnership in last year's *Dinosaur*, the DreamWorks/PDI animators faced a further, fundamental challenge in the creation of *Shrek*: no one knows precisely how dinosaurs moved, but everyone knows what a princess looks like.⁷

7 *Ibid.*

These comments highlight the intense competition and in-fighting that is taking place between production companies and suggest that the changes taking place in the medium are partly in response to the demands of a burgeoning, and increasingly competitive, industry. Thus a focus on enhanced verisimilitude is not so much a technological imperative as an economic, profit-driven goal, and one which helps to ensure the profile and profitability of one product/company over another. This in turn refers us back to the insatiable gaze and expectations of audiences who also have a crucial part to play in the drive towards technological progression. Supervising animator, Raman Hui, is quoted as saying: 'Out of all the characters we have, Fiona was the toughest to get right, because people tend to be more critical when they see her'⁸

8 Ibid

In this almost paranoid atmosphere, much attention is paid to the degree of correspondence that can be maintained between computer-generated figures on the screen and the physical attributes of spectators. This reflects a traditional concern within animation for exploring the parameters of a fictional space (opened up by hand-drawn illustration), in relation to a notion of 'the real', (as exemplified by the mechanical reproductions of film and photography, and direct human experience). Walt Disney, for instance, established his own school to study movement, encouraging his animators to draw inspiration from living, moving things.⁹ However, it is interesting to note how the earliest animated creations tended to celebrate *disjuncture* over *fusion*, maintaining a distinction between image and object, animation and world. Indeed, many see Disney as the person responsible for corrupting the 'purity' of their practice – choosing idealism over abstract, graphic gestures. In his use of light tracing techniques, for instance, he can be seen as introducing an indexicality to the image, a property which hitherto had been associated with the photographic image.

9 See 'The making of Snow White featurette' at the end of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Walt Disney Classics: Buena Vista Home Video, 1993)

Paul Wells is amongst those who condemn Disney and his 'principle of realism'. In his book *Understanding Animation*, he describes how the medium has always enjoyed creative relationships with new technology. Indeed, since its inception, practitioners have worked hard to establish animation both artistically and industrially, and an integral part of this project has been the development of a specific aesthetic language. The outcome of early experiment was the formulation of a series of codes and conventions that encompassed, amongst other things, aspects of character-movement. Subsequently, an understanding of movement became regarded as one of the 'essences' of animation, something that marked the medium apart from other practices. Wells, for example, discusses how the animated figures and forms enjoy freedom from any kind of restraint. Unlike early filmmakers, practitioners working with animation techniques could operate beyond the laws of physics (and of gravity in particular), allowing characters such as Felix the Cat to literally

climb the walls. Even Eisenstein was said to be in awe of the liberty of expression enjoyed by the hand-drawn figures. The liberal gestures, expressed through movement, were interpreted by Eisenstein as a metaphor for human emancipation – alluding to the possibility of freedom from personal restraint. He perceived in animation a space to rediscover the omnipotent fantasies of earliest youth, when people still believed they could aspire to become ‘whatever they wish’¹⁰ As Wells summarizes ‘The freedom of expression sustained in animation was essentially a utopian language appealing because of . . . the ability to dynamically assume any form’¹¹

There is a sense in which the astounding digital productions of today are celebrated for attributes that do not simply confront but fundamentally undermine conventional understandings of the medium. Products such as *Shrek* are cherished as near perfect manifestations of literal form, capable of offering the status of objecthood to representations in the virtual realm. The latter are even attributed with the possibility of supplanting the known world of people and things: for example, of eliminating the need for actors in contemporary cinema. This has been an important strand in popular debate since the release of *Titanic* (James Cameron, Twentieth Century Fox, 1998), a film which used CGI to generate crowd scenes aboard the doomed vessel.¹² Furthermore, the release of the visually stunning (and sometimes confounding) *Final Fantasy the Sprits Within* (Sakaguchi, Columbia, 2001), has ensured this area of discourse will remain open

However all such hyperbole is possible only if the focus of discussion tends towards notions of *simulation* over *representation* – of finished image over artistic process.¹³ It would appear that for many, the latest computer animations are not operating within the parameters of a visual idiom at all; they are simply acquiring enhanced naturalistic forms as the technology is progressively developed. This is something of an anomaly for film studies, where it is rare to find ignorance of structuralist or poststructuralist criticism and, hence, recognition of a mediating interface at work in cinema. It seems that lessons concerning the production of meaning within visual culture have fallen on deaf ears, at least within the realms of popular criticism, for there is growing confusion around the characteristics of the computer as a cultural artefact. Many believe it is simply a powerful machine capable of building a separate universe from the ground up, pixel by pixel – a belief that tends to obscure the social intervention that is taking place within and around the medium itself. Indeed readers of film reviews are normally confronted with virtuoso descriptions of the digital mise-en-scene and observations of the animated characters, descriptions that present the product as a virtual object with immanent or self-contained significance. In fact, details of the complex and eclectic creative processes at work behind the scenes only seem to emerge obliquely,

10 Sergei Eisenstein quoted in Paul Wells *Understanding Animation* (London: Routledge, 1998) p. 22

11 *Ibid.* p. 22

12 *Horizon* ‘Special effects at the cinema’ (BBC2, tx May 1998)

13 Jean Baudrillard ‘The precession of simulacra’ in *Simulacra and Simulation* trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Michigan: MN University of Michigan Press, 1981) pp. 1–42

14 Monahan Can you believe your eyes? p. A9

as if by mistake, in the careless paraphrasing and editing of quotations which surround the words of the animators themselves. Raman Hui continues, for instance: 'Her (Fiona's) eyes tend to be bigger than a normal person's and also her skin is very smooth. We wanted to allow her to act with Shrek and fall in love with him, and keep *that* believable.'¹⁴

This quotation suggests that Hui does not simply aspire to verisimilitude after all, but retains an interest in animation itself and its coded means of presentation. The exaggeration of physical characteristics, for instance, keeps his vision in the realms of cartoons and illustration. The producers maintain a central interest in mimesis – in mimicking the appearance and behaviour of living things – but this preoccupation is neither total nor exclusive. Director Andrew Adamson underlines this point when he selects live-action cinema as a further source of inspiration for *Shrek*. He emphasizes the point that audiences are offered a variety of intertextual reference points by the animators, and not just a series of figurations magically imported from the world of objects and isolated from the artistic imagination. He states.

We wanted to create a three-dimensional world that made you feel as though you'd stepped through a story-book illustration, and CGI lent itself to that very well. We wanted to give it a kind of live-action, independent-film feel, and CGI allows you to do camera moves that are more familiar to audiences from live-action movies¹⁵

15 Ibid

Adamson indicates that as well as computing power and its capacity for heightened detailing of animated sets, it is visualizing techniques borrowed from cinema that make these digital productions feel more immersive for the audience than previous forms of animation. These techniques are absorbing an increasing percentage of the animators' creative efforts and, by inference, it would appear that computer-generated artefacts are acquiring heightened realism in accordance with the terms and devices established by filmmakers and artists, not simply by the conditions imposed by the digital machine and its capacity to emulate human vision.

This should come as no surprise to those with an interest or background in CGI itself, for beyond the world of animation and its own forms of experimentation there exists a history of pioneering artists and engineers who spent many years striving to establish a codified practice for digital imaging technologies. Richard Wright, for instance, describes how elements of the realist principle derive from the preoccupations of a small group of individuals – artists who have had a disproportionate impact on computer graphics in relation to their number. The art of Charles Biederman (1906–), for example, is offered as an important influence on early electronic forms in Britain, for it offered a way of highlighting the

16 Richard Wright 'More power: the pioneers of British computer animation and their legacy' in Julia Knight (ed.) *Diverse Practices: a Critical Reader on British Video Art* (Luton University Press: Luton, 1996) pp. 147–70

17 See URL: <http://www.charlesbiederman.net/biography.html>

18 Chris Briscoe, quoted in Wright 'More power' p. 159

19 See Martin Lambie-Nairn *Brand Identity for Television: With Knobs On* (London: Phaidon, 1997)

20 Sean Cubitt 'Introduction: Le reel c'est impossible: the sublime time of special effects' *Screen* vol. 40 no. 2 (1999) pp. 123–30

mathematical principles and geometric structures that inform the medium.¹⁶

Biederman worked in a neo-constructivist manner, emphasizing conceptual processes over and above a mimetic outcome. Wright argues that Biederman effectively laid the process of image-building bare, experimenting with the basic components of organic structures – such as space, line, colour, shape and their geometric proportions – thus inciting other artists to do the same. This spirit of exploration appealed to the digital pioneers who believed this method was highly appropriate for locating and defining a digital interface. Biederman advocated an evolution of 'visual knowledge' and 'perceptual awareness' in the direction of a three-dimensional art.¹⁷ Sculptor Chris Briscoe is introduced as an early practitioner of the electronic medium, and is among those who adopted Biederman's position. Wright describes how Briscoe worked on, and hence accentuated, the three-dimensional capabilities of the digital machine, choosing to sculpt and render forms that eventually moved through space. He also decided, however, to adopt a more naturalistic approach to his sculpted form, opting for a more mimetic outcome than Biederman. For Briscoe, such a combination of strategies offered the best way of getting to grips with the new medium, harnessing its technical capabilities and putting them on show for others to learn from. Briscoe accounts for this 'realist tendency' in his work by saying 'It is a useful goal for computer graphics if for no other reason than it's fairly clear whether or not you're getting it right – we all know what the world looks like'.¹⁸ This contribution is verified by early deployments of CGI in Britain, such as Martin Lambie-Nairn's 'exploding' animated graphic produced for Channel Four in the 1980s;¹⁹ but it tends to ignore the pioneering work undertaken by practitioners in the USA – such as research undertaken at the University of Utah by Ed Catmull and others. Nevertheless, Wright's account of early CGI is a helpful reminder that a concern for realism (understood, in this context, as an image acquiring objecthood), may be interpreted as a self-reflexive act on the part of digital animators. Rather than simply offering the audience another portal through which to contemplate the world, these developers are more concerned with announcing the current state of technology and/or their computer art.

Sean Cubitt has reached similar conclusions in relation to contemporary special effects, arguing that *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996) offers sequences of CGI which are so excessive in their detailed veracity, that they confront the viewer directly, in and of themselves, and in circumvention of general narrative progression.²⁰ He suggests that such sequences operate with their own set of spatial and temporal concerns, that is, independently of the 'real time' of the plot and the 'real space' of the mise-en-scène. For

this reason he is forced to conclude that computer-generated special effects border on the 'sublime'²¹

Wright's contribution may thus provide a way of understanding the current emphasis on *visual* realism in computer animation. He encourages us to interpret a preoccupation with the latest upgrades made to animated films as a way of thinking about the speed and nature of technological developments taking place in digital production, on the part of producers and consumers alike. Yet Wright is at pains to point out that whilst realist strategies help to display the technological capabilities of computers, at another level they obscure important aspects of the medium. In the context of this essay, it appears that the wide range of imaging techniques and cultural practices which inform the finished product have a tendency to be ignored by the focused nature of public debate. The photorealism at work in *Shrek*, for instance, demonstrates the sophistication of the latest techniques, but likewise serves to distract spectators from other aspects of the enterprise. It would appear that its capacity for photographic verisimilitude has encouraged a detailed exploration of the visual attributes of the text, virtually to the exclusion of its treatment of movement through space. This would suggest that the discourse of animation, along with its established aesthetic languages and codified practices, has almost been eclipsed from discussions of CGI. Indeed, audiences are being encouraged to read the film in ignorance of its traditions, treating it as a series of images without equal.

The confusion between image and artifice arises because computer graphics *seem* to operate with natural vision, offering a world that *feels* as though it could be apprehended with our own eyes, independent of the mediating device of the screen. In the presence of such persuasive imagery it is easy to lose sense of CGI as a product of arts and scientific practice, for its naturalism is occasionally breathtaking. This confusion, however, is located in its ability to do two things: firstly, to present itself as a realistic pictorial *object* or representation, and secondly, to offer visual *experiences* which approximate human perception. In an article entitled 'The automation of sight: from photography to computer vision', Lev Manovich has outlined some of the processes at work in computer graphics.²² He describes how CGI utilizes, amongst other things, a variety of 'depth cues' to fool the eye into experiencing spatial awareness (such as shading, texture and reflections), but suggests its most fundamental achievement is its capacity to generate perspective. The perspectival image, he explains, is constituted from complicated mathematically-derived formulas which have taken many years to devise. As early as 1963, for instance, Lawrence Roberts was attempting to build perspective into the digital machine.²³ He was trying to replicate something that artists had striven hard to achieve – such as the effect of objects receding into the background. This was something film

²² Lev Manovich 'The automation of sight: from photography to computer vision' in Tim Druckery (ed.) *Electronic Culture Technology and Visual Representation* (New York: Aperture 1996)

²³ *Ibid* p 232

and photography had accomplished more easily because, like the human eye, these media are fortunate enough to generate perspective as a consequence of their formal attributes. The lens at the heart of their construction has visual perspective built into it. Only with the replication of depth cues and perspective, says Manovich, could digital technology operate with 'computer vision', generating images that not only reproduce a three-dimensional spatial setting in a two-dimensional form, but which emulate our experience of moving through that setting.

In this way Manovich usefully points out *why* the machine has the capacity to 'see' things as we do, and suggests how an ability to generate perspectival images places computer graphics in the tradition of fine art, film and photography.²⁴ He describes how 'modern society is already heavily invested in lens-based methods of image gathering – which all produce perspectival images'.²⁵ He locates this accomplishment within a general 'rationalisation of sight', but asks whether all the tribulations of the computer scientists are actually worthwhile. Perhaps they have been misled by the representational culture of arts practice.

But why struggle with the ambiguity of perspectival images at all? Instead of inferring three-dimensional structure from a two-dimensional representation, it is possible to measure depth directly by employing various remote sensing devices.²⁶

This allusion to the significance of aesthetic conventions in the development of computer vision (and the related inference that CGI is the outcome of *choice* not *givens*), supports the more obvious statements advanced within this current study that animators look beyond the immediate software package for a sense of purpose behind their individual projects. At times Manovich is equally attentive to this notion of discursive fields impacting upon the digital machine (he also believes computer vision is the product of economic and military objectives, supplemented by a growing interest in cognitive psychology); yet in the process of locating 'the automation of sight,' he effectively reduces film and photography to the status of optical apparatuses or mere instances of 'new technology'. He is less attentive to the notion of discursive fields impacting upon the visual outcomes of the digital machine. Clearly *all* these media function as more than 'perspectival machines', working, as they do, with a wider set of prescriptions than mere documentation. As the words of the animators show, practitioners involved with computer imaging exhibit a greater range of aspirations than the amazing spectacle of 'space mapping'. They are interested in realist techniques, that is to say *modes* of perception, of which the *mechanics* of perception is just one.

By a closer reading of popular texts then, the significance of *genres*²⁷ within visual practice begins to emerge as more crucial to

²⁴ See also Jonathan Crary *Techniques of the Observer on Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1992).

²⁵ Manovich 'The automation of sight', p. 230.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 239.

²⁷ Steve Neale has argued 'for instance how contrary to popular belief genres do not comprise only of films: they consist also and equally of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis which spectators bring with them to the cinema and which interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process'. Steve Neale 'Questions of genre' *Screen* vol. 31 no. 1 (1990) pp. 45–66.

the history of CGI than some commentators would like to suppose. Practitioners are aware that audiences recognize a host of visual clues in feature-length presentations, of which depth-cues are only the tip of the iceberg. They recognize that most experienced spectators are well-versed in conventions at work in film and animation, and respond to visual stimuli (such as lighting, framing, depth of field) in cognitive as well as behavioural ways. Yet an understanding of digital animation which embraces continuity *across* a host of contemporary visual culture practices, and consequently puts the spectator in an active relation to the production of meaning, can detract from a progressive discourse of technology which accords status to novelty, innovation and coherent objecthood. Even so, the popular texts which propagate such technophobic theories often carry sufficient commentary to undermine their own testimony. In the case of film reviews, for example, the artistic concerns of practitioners lie just beneath the surface of the over-privileged, science-inflected, techno-rhetoric of journalists. In an article entitled '*Toy Story 2: "The Godfather Part II of animated movies. But funnier. Flicks*'', for example, the words of practitioners underscore the importance of the realist enterprise in contemporary animated works while, at the same time, undermining its simplicity as an idea.²⁸ The passages of description which verify the naturalistic credentials of the piece (its colour, texture and study of organic motion) simultaneously incorporate a celebration of its illusionistic accoutrements (the 'invisible' work of dolly shots, zooms, depth of focus and sources of lighting).

28 Anwar Brett, *Toy Story 2: "The Godfather Part II of animated movies. But funnier. Flicks* (February 2000)

The article in question describes how *Toy Story 2* was originally conceived as a straight-to-video sequel to the original *Toy Story* (Pixar/Disney, 1995), for how could the success of this film be replicated without the product becoming formulaic? The project was then upgraded to a cinematic release, however, because the material being produced seemed more than capable of sustaining a feature film and, in the meantime, more technical confidence had been gained during work on *A Bug's Life* (Pixar/Disney, 1999). In particular, the production team was persuaded that the limitations in the original – that is, its lapses of realist credibility – could be overcome whilst retaining the heart of the story. Galyn Susman, supervising technical director of *Toy Story 2*, describes how the team wanted to make the human characters fit into the world better than in their previous incarnation, yet without breaking the 'form, simplicity and charm that *Toy Story* had'.²⁹

29 Ibid. p. 50

After *A Bug's Life* we knew we had to put a lot more visual richness in our imagery than we had in *Toy Story*. We had all types of things we could do, and so a lot of it was a question of stepping back and asking what were the problems we needed to solve.³⁰

30 Ibid.

Whilst this speaks of a continued preoccupation with what the team

(and their machines) can achieve in *technologically-specific* terms, there is also a sense that artistic sensibilities are emerging. This is most apparent when Susman starts referring to the 'style' of the original film, seeing this as something to be retained in the sequel. She describes how the practitioners wanted to dispose of the 'crispness' (or technical exactness) of the computer image and enhance its mode of engaging the (cinematic) audience in other ways. She explains:

Everything was always in focus, so sometimes the audience was overwhelmed by the visual detail and wasn't always able to focus in on individual characters. Here we took a more filmic approach, having a depth of field and a selective focus, letting the detail of the background fall away to something that's less in focus.³¹

31 Ibid

This quotation is interesting in that it consciously references ways of seeing that are already textualized for the producer, that is, its language is couched in techno-cultural terms rather than techno-natural terms. In her role as technical director, Susman spends much of her time improving the 'visual perspective' of the animation, something she correlates with the cinematic screen and the existing procedures employed by filmmakers. She describes how:

That was something we worked very hard on, to make something that still felt like *Toy Story* but definitely gave you a much better visual perspective on what it is that you want to see. It's sort of a different feeling, but we then have to apply that to where we are, and ask what sort of lens we're using, and what would be in focus if we were using that type of lens. It's a case of applying those standard live action principles to the camera.³²

32 Ibid p. 51

The extent to which these technical refinements are guided by *intertextual concerns* is further evidenced through another anecdote, also related through journalistic writing – this time the 'trade' publication *CGI*. In an article entitled 'Toyzone: *Toy Story 2* preview', Bob Dormon describes how *Toy Story 2* is at least *ten* times more complex than the original movie. This complexity is located firmly in terms of its digital capabilities, for, as he explains, one *Toy Story 2* frame could take between ten minutes and three days to render.³³ After consulting associate technical director Oren Jacob, however, the journalist changes his tone slightly and abandons his grand narrative of digital progression. Instead he describes how *all* the characters could now enjoy better texture mapping (thanks to Pixar's own Renderman software and Interactive Effects' Amazon Paint package), and yet he perceives that the enhancement project was at odds with the specific requirements of the animated product: 'Five years on from *Toy Story*, the opportunity to make everything better in the sequel needed to be tempered by character continuity'.³⁴ In particular, Jacob speaks of the danger of over-enhancing the main

33 Bob Dormon: 'Toyzone: *Toy Story 2* preview', *CGI: The Future of Computer Graphics* vol. 5 no. 3 (2000) p. 42.

34 Ibid p. 42.

protagonist, Woody. The capacity for adding more detail to his cowboy denims, for instance, could counteract some of his fundamental, non-visual characteristics. For Woody is an authentic toy, a collector's item from the sixties who exhibits good old American values, at odds with the vicissitudes of contemporary fashion. In order to stay faithful to his 'nature', the production team thus decided to limit the upgrades made to Woody's appearance – which were largely reserved for the human characters such as the toy-dealer, Al. However the rest of Woody's Round-Up gang, being new to the story, were not denied their digitally enhanced denim in the same way as Woody. This dispensation made sense in terms of the plot lines being developed because one of the new figures (Stinky Pete) has never come out of his box, while another (Jessie) has not been played with for many years. Compared to Woody they are, and *should* be, in pristine condition. Even so, whilst these adjustments ensured the flow of narrative, there was a call for further compromises to be made, for the dispensations involved had failed to make sense at the level of comprehending the image. The new protagonists, whose denim had been treated to the latest in texture mapping, appeared too realistic next to Woody. Kitted out in shaded denim, the newly rendered characters tended towards the hyperreal³⁵ and challenged the aspiration for CGI to be perceived as equivalent to a live-action, *cinematic* image. As Dormon summarizes:

Material details such as plastics and their related textures were looked at, and tests done to compare old and new models to avoid drifting away from the original colour and tone.³⁶

It seems that an important lesson was learnt regarding the nature of simulation, and one that relates back to a problem raised earlier. For as Jean Baudrillard points out in *Simulacra and Simulation*,³⁷ in a image-based world where there is no referring back to 'the real' but only to another image of 'the real', the veracity of the image is somewhat dependent on its relation to other visual media. Verisimilitude is not simply virtual, it is relative. This first became startlingly apparent in relation to CGI when *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) utilized a technical device known as 'motion blur'. The latter overcame the visual limitations of stop-frame animation, which had previously created moving forms with more clarity and definition than other objects appearing in the same frame. Thanks to 'motion blur', however, digitally-generated dinosaurs could be blended seamlessly with live-action images, for they now enjoyed the same fuzzy visual attributes of an actor running in front of the camera lens. As with the case of crisp images in *Toy Story 2*, the attributes in question refer back to the visual qualities of the medium itself rather than the real world *per se*, for fuzziness is the product of a specific set of discrepancies which exist between the speed of action taking place, the speed of the lenses used in production and

³⁵ Baudrillard 'The precession of simulacra' pp 12–14

³⁶ Dormon 'Toyzone' p. 42

³⁷ Baudrillard 'The precession of simulacra' pp 12–14

the speed of the film moving through the camera. Motion blur is an optical effect, like chiaroscuro, which signifies movement in the context of cinema. Therefore, if the protagonist and his prehistoric adversary could be presented in compatible terms, their visual equivalence was predominantly filmic, addressing the terms and conditions of recording movement. Dormon reflects that: 'Director, John Lasseter of Pixar stressed that the idea wasn't to create perfectly realistic humans. Instead, the cartoon flavour is retained but the humans appear more realistic.'³⁸ Such an observation issues a further challenge to those journalists and critics alike who, as I have indicated, would argue that science and technology alone set the parameters of the possible within digital animation. Such assumptions, it would seem, are not the preserve of a few but, due to their location in the public domain, are leaking into wider consciousness. These assumptions can be detected beneath the many stories which circulate within and around CGI. One of the most persuasive stories of recent times is, for example, that the early digital animators were only interested in making dinosaurs because humans could not be realistically apprehended.³⁹ Although there is some truth to this, the widespread currency and assumed credibility of such stories should be a cause for concern. For ultimately such tales are constitutive of a *partial* position within computer animation discourse, despite their totalizing aspirations. Some refinement is needed because the *grand narrative* of evolving realism tends, among other things, to lead commentators to reify the machine (in much the same way as they reify the image), and attribute it with a startling degree of independence from the practitioners who use it. From such a perspective, even when the computer proves technically inadequate to tackle organic forms, the machine is nevertheless perceived as *willing*. (Human skin and hair are there for the taking, just give the technology a few more weeks/months/years). Taken to its logical conclusion, this dominant position within CGI discourse secures a degree of autonomy for the computer which is tantamount to ascribing it a life of its own (thus touching on notions developed in and around Artificial Intelligence)⁴⁰ Indeed, to believe the stories which surround CGI is to step back in time, to a land before cultural theory and critical thinking were invented, and to a social setting where the centrality of scientific objectivity has yet to be challenged.

Such a preoccupation with a 'new' medium and its impact upon visual culture is partly explained by the continuing popularity of an eminent academic who achieved great notoriety in the sixties. It is useful to note that Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man* was first published nearly forty years ago (in the wake of television and general social upheaval),⁴¹ yet this seminal text seems to have lost none of its clout with many of the cyber-gurus at MIT and beyond.⁴² One of the basic tenets of this book, as the title suggests, is that new technologies enter the social world and

38 Dormon Toyzone p 42

39 Two students confidently asserted to me, after I had given a lecture on the subject that the feature-length animation *Dinosaur* (Disney 2000) dismissed any reservations I might have that computer animators could now render hair and fur realistically. On viewing the film I was struck by the fact that these aspects were indeed realistic – but only in a photographic sense. Their rhetoric had exceeded my expectations and reinforced my uneasiness with commonsense understandings of realism.

40 For more on Artificial Intelligence from a cultural studies perspective see *New Formations* no 29 Technoscience (Autumn 1996).

41 Marshall McLuhan. *The medium is the message. Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man* (1964) (Cambridge MA MIT Press 1995).

42 See among others Paul Levinson *Digital McLuhan* (London Routledge 1999) and Nicholas Negroponte *Being Digital* (London Hodder and Stoughton 1995).

43 McLuhan *Understanding Media*
p. 8

introduce a transformative set of possibilities for the people living within it. In 'The medium is the message', for instance, he argues that all new media have content, but to study information communicated is to miss the point. For lurking behind the surface data – understood as the reconstituted content of another medium – lies the *real* cause of cultural change. Dismissing the methodology and criticisms instigated by media students of the time (namely content analysis), McLuhan argues that: 'the "message" of any medium or technology is the *change of scale* or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs'.⁴³ Hence the real significance of a new medium such as the railways, he advances, lies in their acceleration and enlargement of the scale of human movement and transportation; generating new kinds of work, cities and patterns of leisure *independent* of what the trains themselves carried. Furthermore, and equally crucial to laying the foundations of contemporary debate, technologically-determined change is seen as invisible to the general population, for it is assumed to be working beneath the level of human awareness. All but the most acutely perceptive citizens are presumed blind to the changes taking place in society because they operate at the level of sensory perception. He continues

Our conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot.

... The effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance.⁴⁴

44 Ibid. p. 18

It is interesting to find these arguments being repostulated in relation to computer-generated animation. For whilst many contemporary commentators occupy a different critical location to McLuhan, they appear, nonetheless, to embrace new technologies as *further* extensions of man, and ones which operate at the level of sensory perception.

Some journalists may be forgiven for this lack of critical distance from the object of scrutiny, particularly as many rely on the production notes generated by studios to accompany each feature's release. However, many cultural critics are equally uncritical in the face of our enhanced capability to reproduce the world, digitally, in all its glory. Chris Webster is typical of those writing about CGI in the field of film studies, not least in his preference for directing his concern towards its impact on special effects rather than computer animation more broadly.⁴⁵ Like many, he also speaks of the accelerated rate of technical change taking place within Hollywood and, furthermore, identifies a dominant fascination with technology at the expense of creativity among its practitioners. Despite any reservations he might have in this area, he is pleased to announce how CGI is supplanting labour-intensive tasks within cinema and

45 Chris Webster *Film: the place where art and technology meet* in Jill Nelmes (ed.) *An Introduction to Film Studies* (London: Routledge, 1996)

improving the look of animated works. Rather than contemplate the complexity of images, however, he merely celebrates the fact that, at last, spectators can no longer distinguish between authentic film footage and integrated digital graphics. Indeed he boldly suggests that, as far as the viewers were concerned, the CGI in *Jurassic Park* did not offer a *facsimile* of live action but live action itself. He concludes of the film that 'the audience is no longer watching computer graphics, they are viewing wildlife footage of extinct creatures'⁴⁶ In this respect, both Webster and the audience can be seen as understanding CGI as a sophisticated addition to traditional analogue media. It seems to have no need to refer back to 'the real' because it has integrity of its own. Indeed digital reproduction techniques are commonly understood as enhancing our capacity to visually apprehend the world, not only improving the veracity of image-making, but also offering a wider set of subjects for contemplation than do lens-based media (that is, real *and* imagined objects) while attaining even greater levels of reproducibility than before (that is, global and instantaneous transmission). The evidence provided by secondary sources would suggest that the receptive communities of film are generally entranced by the quality of digital vision yet remain innocent of the extent to which the 'reality' of the image is itself contrived and conventionalized.⁴⁷ Discussion in the realm of digital animation is yet to embrace notions of (inter)textual analysis or to attempt a deconstruction of the very concept of virtuality.

There is a general tendency, therefore, to attribute CGI with an alarming autonomy from its productive contexts (of film, photography and animation). The ascendant discourse within CGI is one which locates social agency, in all its forms, at the margins of the graphical interface. It appears that the medium *is* the message, with content – cinema and illustration, for instance – being trivial instances of communication. Yet the computer-mediated films themselves display an open affection for their diverse set of origins. The first *Toy Story*, for example, contains a humorous sequence which pays homage to *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Steven Spielberg, 1981) and in which Buzz Lightyear is forced to flee a gigantic rolling orb (in this case, a globe), which threatens to destroy all before it. In contrast, *Shrek* offers a less specific reference to film when the eponymous hero enters a stadium drenched in sunlight. As he emerges from a darkened tunnel, which forms an entrance to the coliseum, there is a subtle but poignant detail incorporated into the image. Alongside the animated figure and the mise-en-scene into which he is inserted, there is the 'excessive' addition of lens glare – a momentary lighting effect which is instigated as the final arch subsides and the cinematic screen is filled by the sky. As the character of Shrek constitutes part of that movement-image, there is little possibility of this being a naturalistic reference to his own

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 70

⁴⁷ See Liz Wells (ed.), *Photography a Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1997).

point-of-view, a shot which represents the subjective experience of being blinded by the sun. Instead it operates as a reference to the camera itself, that in the 'real' world of filmmaking would be recording his entry into the arena. It indicates that Shrek is being treated as a protagonist proper, that is to say, as an actor whose motivations are not inextricably linked to the very fabric of the digital image. No wonder audiences are becoming confused!

Furthermore, it could be argued that these subtle references to the big screen *could*, in themselves, be paying homage to other kinds of contemporary image-making, for there are a growing number of animations which display a similar preoccupation with cinematic detailing. Genndy Tartakovsky's *Dexter's Laboratory* (Cartoon Network, 2000), for instance, offers an exploration of the cinematic *shot*. The director enjoys experimenting with the closeup, the long shot and the panning shot, representing these 'effects' of filmic production in a deliberately crude, hand rendered style. His pleasure in playing with the construction of images dramatizes a growing preoccupation with diverse forms of imagery and, furthermore, the increasing proximity which exists between the interests of new wave animators and their colleagues in the mainstream.

The anecdotal evidence presented above seems trivial in the face of a bigger picture relentlessly proposed by journalists and analysts alike, based as it is on the awesome capabilities and assumed characteristics of the computer. However, such little stories stand as individual moments of resistance to the (near) monolithic rhetoric which surrounds CGI and *could* be perceived as crucial to building a fuller understanding of this technology. The trivia which surrounds the release of computer-animated feature films can encourage an understanding of CGI as a cultural artefact or social practice which crosses scientific solutions with artistic enterprise. Concluding an earlier story, for instance, to discover that Oren Jacob's team eventually gave up on the digitized 'nature' of denim and turned, instead, to their art department for solving their 'hyperreality' crisis, suggests that the solutions generated by computers are neither total nor wholly desirable. It is rewarding to discover that the 'mood' sketches created by art director Ralph Eggleston in the preliminary stages of the *Toy Story 2* project were eventually consulted by the troubled technicians.⁴⁸ For in the act of literally returning to the drawing board, the animators reveal that they had momentarily lost sight of the fact (like the rest of us), that computer animation is an *act* not simply an outcome. These moments show how CGI does not always bow to the dictates of technical possibility nor the laws of perception, but that the 'reality' of denim is also dependent on the culturally-inflected *contexts* of viewing. As Dormon concludes: 'They realised they didn't need to model close to reality, but instead to create something that looked good on screen'.⁴⁹

Once the significance of viewing conditions has been

48 Dormon Toyzone, p. 42

49 Ibid p. 42

acknowledged, a host of examples can be cited which reinforce the suggestion that digital animations, aspiring to the verisimilitude of live-action cinema, are not simply harnessing digital technology but adopting a range of realist strategies which correspond to a filmic domain. Director John Lasseter, for instance, has broadened the discussion of naturalism in CGI to include a deeper understanding of characterization. Whilst Lasseter is of the opinion that changes made to rendering techniques (such as shaders) have allowed for a literally three-dimensional character to appear on the screen, he maintains that the script, and the plot that informs its development, are crucial to securing the apprehension of fully-rounded characters on the screen. For instance, in a documentary accompanying the original *Toy Story* video release, he explains 'All of them (Pixar animations) focus on character animation. That was the key . . . To me, we create characters.'⁵⁰ Lasseter thus sees part of the enhancement taking place within the animated feature as being organized around cinematic techniques. He hopes to build characters who will resonate with cinema audiences and offer themselves as objects for *identification* as well as contemplation. In this respect he can be seen as locating himself in a well-known tradition within the history of film – as an auteur of the finished product – for he is more Hitchcock than Chuck Jones. Indeed he seems to share the aesthetic concerns of the mainstay of Hollywood filmmakers – to offer a fuller understanding of the human condition through its dramatic portrayal on the screen. He says

The thing we developed in the original is the whole notion that toys are alive when people aren't around. In bringing an inanimate object to life my philosophy is always to understand what the object is manufactured for. A toy is manufactured to be played with by a child, therefore deep in its soul that's what it wants to do more than anything else. . . . These are the things we dealt with in the first movie. But the thing that I felt would be the most tragic for a toy, is to be outgrown by the child who loves you. . . . What's kind of exciting about that, is that there is some deep emotional thing we can deal with here, and what's interesting is the way people watch the movie and then read into it themselves. . . . They see it as the equivalent of mortality, just like us we're all going to die one day, and parents watch this and they see in it the whole notion of their children growing up.⁵¹

Lasseter is interested in the relationship that a film can establish between an audience and its protagonists, and is happy when computer-generated characters secure the same affections as real-life actors. He is impressed, for example, by tales of Tom Hanks (who provides the key protagonist's voiceover) being recognized as Woody in the world beyond cinema.⁵² How can it be possible that an actor can be (mis)taken for an animated figure? Could this be the ultimate

⁵⁰ John Lasseter quoted in *The story behind Toy Story: Toy Story Special Collector's Edition* (Disney/Pixar video 1996)

⁵¹ John Lasseter quoted in Brett *Toy Story 2* p. 50

⁵² *Ibid.* p. 51

testament to the veracity of CGI and its collapse of 'the digital' into 'the real'? If we are tempted to think so, then it is worth remembering how Lasseter's own work reveals a complex manipulation of aural and visual clues at the heart of digital production. The boundaries which exist between these two realms cannot be collapsed so easily, for ultimately they require the complicity of the audience. This complicity is now resolutely located in establishing a correspondence between image and world, screen and life. Whilst this has been the case in classic realist cinema for the best part of a century, this is a significant and innovative (but not necessarily *progressive*) development within the field of animation

In many ways Lasseter's contribution can still be situated within animated traditions as well, for Walt Disney is also identified as someone who harnessed the power of technology to overhaul the medium. In the making of *Snow White* (Walt Disney, 1937), for instance, he utilized light tracing techniques and multiplane cameras to augment the veracity of the image – supporting the realist dialogue and narrative progression of the first feature-length animation with impressive draughtsmanship. Hence, establishing an exchange between the world and its image has been an integral part of the animated project for nearly seventy years. In the earliest animations, however, there seemed to be more enthusiasm for leaving the world behind. The dream sequence, for example, was seen as a crucial device for implementing such flights of fancy, a lapse in consciousness serving as a portal to a nether world of unlimited imagination. Paul Wells describes how the naturalizing frame of the dream was soon abandoned altogether, as many practitioners began to identify the fluid flexibility of the illustrative/imaginative space as an essence of animation. Oscar Fischinger was among those who rejected the realist enterprise in order to explore animation's capacity to visualize abstract formations. Wells suggests that:

Fischinger recognised animation as a form which could accommodate fluid, primal, expressions of thought and feeling. Shapes and forms need not represent anything at all and would provoke a variety of responses in the viewers who received them.⁵³

53 Wells (ed.) *Photography: a Critical Introduction* p. 29

As mentioned earlier, in the light of 'what might have been', Disney's contribution has been ill-received by many practitioners. Wells accuses him of losing sight of the media-specificity of animation, (of rejecting a Modernist agenda, if you like), inaugurating a shift away from avant-garde experiment (or 'pure' animation) towards the mundane accumulation of realist devices (or 'populist' animation). Disney is perceived to have hijacked a potentially expressive medium and subsequently to have set limits on its horizons. Wells concludes:

54 Ibid p 23

With each technological development, however, Disney moved further away from the plasmatic flexibility of many of the early silly symphonies, and coerced the animated form into a neo-realist practice⁵⁴

55 Ibid p 22

If Disney misrepresented the animated form and its specific capabilities by aligning animation with aspects of photorealism, then this ‘misrecognition’ of animation’s potential continues to this day. Indeed it is interesting to note how the solid figures in *Shrek* occupy a space governed by the physical laws of nature rather than one solely governed by imagination, only engaging in occasional moments of ‘plasmaticness’.⁵⁵ When Donkey exceeds the confines of realism and takes to the air, the sequence is not offered as an imaginative space in which to contemplate fantasy ‘versus’ reality, but as a moment of heightened naturalism. The field of hyperreality is opened up to visualize an enchanted animal, one who has fallen under a spell. Realism is thus distorted, momentarily, in an effort to highlight the contradictory nature of Donkey’s speech. The disruption operates in a direct and causal relationship to the script. As if to reinforce the point, *Shrek*’s producer Jeffrey Katzenberg reveals how ‘there is no word that is more anathema to me than “cartoon”’.⁵⁶ In fact, Katzenberg makes a number of pragmatic and revealing contributions to the debate around CGI and animation. At times he is proud to be associated with notions of the animated medium, for the referent allows him to celebrate the benchmarks being set by his digital products and the ways in which they utilize the latest technical devices. He is particularly proud of an invitation to show *Shrek* at Cannes alongside more conventional cinematic forms. He is relieved to discover that animation is no longer a ‘side-show gimmick’,⁵⁷ but can hold its own against other feature films. One is forced to wonder, however, at what point *Shrek* ceases to resemble animation at all. Perhaps it would be more helpful to see the film as an amalgam of artistic enterprises, as a creative outcome which lacks this degree of specificity? Katzenberg himself admits

56 Jeffrey Katzenberg quoted in Anwar Brett Interview with Jeffrey Katzenberg URL http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2001/06/11/shrek_2001_review.shtml

57 Ibid p 1

Animation needs to transform itself and move into the twenty-first century, especially the traditional animation movie. It needs to embrace the digital tools and get out of the analogue world. After all, animation is technique, not a genre.⁵⁸

58 Ibid

The nature of the image-complex called *Shrek*, like its peers, seems to place far more emphasis on screen-based design than traditional animation. In fact, the quote would suggest that the only remaining link between past and present is the aspiration to bring inanimate things to life. As Katzenberg suggests, there are specific techniques involved in this process: for animations create the illusion of movement by placing still frames in sequence. They work with the ‘persistence of vision’ (the phenomenon where the eyes retain images

for a tenth of a second), translating discrete inanimate moments into moving pictures. Another residual feature of the animated form is the tracing of 'real' movement (captured from living people and things), and its conversion into representational figures. This is now achieved using stop-motion animation, a device that allows animators to capture the central points of human movement and figuration (as marked out on a real person or ceramic model), and to translate the information into digital data. Thus, despite allusions to the contrary (and some related inflections within my own discussion), there are still ways in which animation retains an indexical relationship to the world. At a more obvious level, this is achieved in the continued use of the voices of actors such as Tom Hanks, mentioned earlier. Indeed, the products of digitality are not totally synthetic, but have the marks of human presence, and traces of artistic creativity, inscribed all over them.

In this respect *Final Fantasy* is no exception, despite the fact that it stands at the apex of the digital enterprise. For stop-motion techniques are undeniably at its heart, capturing the movement and gestures of real actors and converting their human expression into digital data. *Final Fantasy*, however, refuses to privilege the moment of capture in animation, treating post-production techniques as an integral part of the creative process. There is a preoccupation, for instance, with depth of focus – another technique borrowed from the photographic arts. Focus is utilized not simply to give a sense of depth to the image, but as a means of encouraging spectators to shift their gaze from one character to another – to *read* and interpret the image in guided ways. This is something that traditional animation might have achieved through a more thoughtful application of movement, and by a fuller consideration of spatial organization. The film also indulges in an elaborate experiment with lighting and one, in its intensity, which leaves even *film noir* in the shadows. Indeed, *Final Fantasy* seems to share the visual preoccupations of some of the latest video games like *Shenmue* (Sega Dreamcast, 2000) which place a predominant emphasis on the graphic details of computer-generated environments. This connection makes more sense when one realizes that the original format of *Final Fantasy* is, in fact, a series of computer games designed by the pre-eminent dot.com entertainment company, the Square Company. According to their official website, Version VII offers nine characters, state-of-the-art 'real-time' battles and sixty minutes of 'cinematic sequences'. The potential user is encouraged to 'explore massive, beautifully rendered locations in this amazing adventure that goes beyond reality'.⁵⁹ This passage resonates with publicity material on the official website for *Shrek*, which further demonstrates a conflation of interests between cinema with the world of games. The copy states how the film is involved in:

59 Official Eidos copy. URL
<http://www.eidos.com/finalfantasy/html>

creating realistic, believable human characters, rich, organic natural environments: mixtures of fluids (especially interacting with characters), clothing with detailed textures and movement, realistic hair, fur and fire.⁶⁰

This evidence would suggest that CGI has shattered the animated form into a host of image-related enterprises which are characterized partly by technical innovation and partly by diverse discursive engagements. It suggests that digital products such as *Final Fantasy* are the outcome of strategic exchange taking place across a wide range of image-oriented practices, of which 'animation' is just one.

The intention of this essay has been, therefore, to locate some of the sources adopted by digital animators in order to offer images of stunning veracity. The point being emphasized is relatively simple: the referent at work in digital animation is not exclusively the directly experienced world of people and things but, increasingly, the representational formats (of film and photography, for instance) which encompass that world. This emphasis suggests that the history of computer-animated film is not unfolding according to a predetermined techno-logic and one that puts it on a collision course with established cinema (in particular its use of real actors), but is evolving in a more distracted fashion, drawn as it is towards a variety of conventional filmmaking techniques and other experimental arts practices. By looking at the examples of *Shrek*, *Toy Story 2* and *Final Fantasy*, I hope to have shown that in the tradition of Renaissance Men cited in the introduction, contemporary animators seem to have an interest in *modes* of visual perception as much as a preoccupation with technology itself.

Of course there are no surprises here, as technology and modes of perception are entirely interrelated, yet in the world of popular culture, methods of visualization have a nasty habit of being obliterated by other (over-privileged) aspects of technical achievement. Modes of perception, already inextricably allied to the camera lens within contemporary culture, are now being doubly and dangerously naturalized within digital culture. For if the camera within film and photography has acquired strategies to establish itself in the position of a surrogate and all-seeing eye, in digital cinema, it is simultaneously the contrived photographic and a biological gaze that are being replicated. This is not a situation that can necessarily be avoided, but it could at least be more systematically noted. For when the eye of man *and* the lens of a camera become conflated in the realms of computer technology, unreasonable and misleading claims start to emerge around the digital universe and its relation to the experiential world. It starts to appear as if the computer is not a medium at all, as though it were a virtual world, not Windows.

Martin Kemp has drawn similar conclusions about the relationships which exist between arts and science in his impressive mapping of

⁶¹ Martin Kemp Kemp's conclusions *Nature* no 392 (30 April 1998) p 876

⁶² *Ibid* p 875

⁶³ *Ibid* p 876

⁶⁴ See John Tagg *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (London: Macmillan 1988)

the history of art and its struggle for realism. Part of his thesis is organized around a distinction between a realism based on scientific logic and one based on 'unnatural' artistic sensitivities. Picasso, for instance, is seen as 'working to rules specific to the nature of "pictorial reality" rather than traditional naturalism', that is, with a combination of both.⁶¹ He is understood as having broken with the 'structural intuition' of institutionalized art practice in order to advance his own model of reality in painting. Whilst contemporary animators have decided to maintain a more analytical form of image-making 'in which aspects of appearance are remade – literally-represented . . . on the basis of . . . an intellectual understanding of what is being seen',⁶² I would argue that they are moving closer to Kemp's description of Picasso, who is located as a practitioner who places most of his emphasis on the image-making process. Kemp concludes that:

modern artists are striving to forge a realm of artistic reality separate from that of the eyewitness and of conventional naturalism. They are seeking an aesthetic autonomy that obeys its own set of unfathomable rules.⁶³

Whilst I would not agree that animators are seeking aesthetic autonomy, there is evidence, at least, of a growing interest in, and proliferation of, *pictorial realities*. Such an interest, once more widely acknowledged, should help to undermine some of the more dubious assumptions which have dominated popular conceptions of CGI. Indeed, I hope to have indicated that journalistic discourses, supported by the words and predictions of McLuhanesque technogurus, have occupied centre stage for too long. Too many people seem persuaded that digital animation should be understood as yet another 'extension of man', enhancing his capacity to reproduce the world in all its Technicolored, shaded and rendered glory. Whilst it cannot be contested that the computer has, indeed, provided us with some useful tools with which to visualize the world and make its image incredibly realistic, the outcome is not informed solely by the machine nor by its capacity to mimic the physical aspects of human perception. The realism on offer is more crucially informed by prior engagements, on the part of animators and audiences alike, with existing media. Whilst this may appear stunningly obvious to some, especially in the wake of a poststructuralist critique of the scientific-objective discourses which have dominated film and photography,⁶⁴ this area of cultural life seems to be involved in some kind of backlash against such methods of analysis. The celebratory tone of CGI discourse could be perceived as a return to the tenets of modernism (with its interest in the media-specificity and formal attributes of computer-generated imagery) on the part of critic, or evidence of a total lack of faith in the critical enterprise on the part of journalists.

debate:

***Baise-moi*, feminist cinemas and the censorship controversy**

SCOTT MacKENZIE

Over the last few years, the appropriations of the generic conventions of pornography have made in-roads into art-cinema. While there are some antecedents to this development – Bernardo Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* (France/Italy, 1973), Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò* (Italy, 1975) and Nagisa Oshima's *In the Realm of the Senses* (Japan, 1976) immediately come to mind—the arrival of films such as *Romance* (Catherine Breillat, France, 1999), *Seul contre tous* (Gaspar Noé, France, 2000), *Intimacy* (Patrice Chéreau, France, 2001) *Center of the World* (Wayne Wang, US, 2001) and *Baise-moi* (Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh-Thi, France, 2000) represent an escalation in the ways in which the boundaries between pornography and art cinema are conceptualized and blurred by filmmakers, critics and censors.

This aesthetic and political shift in film culture has again brought to the forefront the spectre of censorship. And censorship inevitably provokes controversy. The reason for this is plain: no matter where one stands on a controversial film's relative aesthetic or political merits, there is little doubt that any form of censorship can turn a film into a *cause célèbre*, as censorship is not simply about legalistic questions pertaining to representation, but also about the public policing of morality. And the moral and political Right in particular are concerned with the purported relationship between pornographic images and causalist notions of effect. As Carol S. Vance argues

about the censors on the Right who were behind the Meese Commission on pornography in the USA during the 1980s

Conservatives also project their intense feelings about sexuality and gender politics onto pornography. Pornography, to them, is a stand-in for destructive sexual impulses that, left untouched, threaten to destroy the stability of the family, the authority of men over women, and the power of parents over children. Sexual pleasure is always suspect and usually dangerous, unless harnessed within marriage, reproduction and God's plan. Stirrings of desire, as well as individuals who would encourage or defend it, constitute a moral lapse and a personal threat. The battle against unruly sexual impulses is a never-ending struggle, even for those with strong convictions. Part of the charm of regulating pornography is that sexual images in the public arena can be banished more reliably than sexual impulses in the individual psyche.¹

1 Carol S. Vance, 'The pleasure of looking: the Attorney General's commission on pornography versus visual images' in Carol Squiers (ed.) *The Critical Image: Essays on Contemporary Photography* (Seattle: WA: Bay Press, 1990), pp. 39-40.

Therefore, if pornography is making supposed 'in-roads' into more mainstream forms of representation (in this case, art cinema), the corrupting influence of the pornographic image is spreading in an unsettling and insidious manner.

In this light, the debate surrounding Despentès's and Trinh-Thi's *Baise-moi* is quite obviously part of a larger trend. Over the last few years, a number of films have re-ignited the often intense debate about whether or not film censorship of any kind (be it State-run or self-regulatory) has a place within contemporary democracies. The scandals in Britain, continental Europe, the USA and Canada surrounding the release of films such as Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (US, 1993), David Cronenberg's *Crash* (Canada, 1996), Cynthia Roberts's *Bubbles Galore* (Canada, 1996), Lars von Trier's *The Idiots* (Denmark, 1999) and Breillat's *Romance* point towards a trend in the cinema to push the boundaries of what can be shown on the screen and to challenge the often dictatorial interpretation given to censorship guidelines.² The tension provoked by this trend produces some of the most compelling debates within contemporary film culture, along with some of the most interesting, if controversial, current cinema.

2 *Natural Born Killers* and *Crash* were highly contentious releases in the UK and the US respectively while *Bubbles Galore* partially funded by Telefilm Canada (which itself is a government agency) was denounced in the Canadian House of Commons for its porn aesthetic and the use of Canadian tax dollars to fund it.

The case of *Baise-moi* is an extreme example of the blurring of boundaries between pornography and art cinema, precisely because the film incorporates the aesthetics of heterosexual, hardcore pornography to the greatest degree. The filmmakers produce a film that ironically provides many of the narrative and stylistic devices that pornography has so often been derided for neglecting. But Despentès and Trinh-Thi also infuse the film with an ideological point of view that destabilizes both art-house audiences and the consumers of more typical pornographic product, producing an interstitial form of cinema. Writing on the aesthetics of 1970s pornography films, Joseph W. Slade notes:

Over seven decades, the stag film has evolved formulas and clichés to cushion the impact, and they have been transmuted into patterns within feature films as well. Frequently lamented by the critic as boring, the cushioning devices are crucial: popular belief to the contrary, sex has not lost its mystery or power, and without the cut-out characters and the erotic templates, film pornography would probably be intolerable to those who enjoy it most. Protective on the one hand, restrictive on the other, but ontologically necessary in either case, the conventions help to explain why it is so difficult for a pornographer aesthetically to improve his product in any meaningful sense.³

This ‘porn dilemma’ is echoed in J. Hoberman’s comment that ‘It would be interesting, though, to see what might happen if [*Baise-moi*] were unleashed on the Playboy Channel or the unsuspecting patrons of an ordinary theatre’.⁴ In this context, one could see *Baise-moi* as a feminist-punk version of the critique of voyeurism and identification found in 1970s antirealist feminist cinemas

Baise-moi – released in English-language markets as *Rape Me*, but more accurately translated as *Fuck Me* – forcefully questions the limits of freedom of expression in contemporary cinema.⁵ Based on Despentès’s novel of the same name, *Baise-moi* tells the story of two women, Nadine (Karen Bach) and Manu (Raffaella Anderson) who go on a killing-spree-sex-romp road-trip. The trip is triggered by two events. Nadine, a part-time prostitute, who enjoys watching pornography while having sex with her clients – most notably Noé’s equally controversial art-porn film *Seul contre tous* – kills her roommate after a fight. Manu is brutally raped and subsequently kills her concerned but domineering brother in a fit of anger. The two women then meet, and leave town sharing a car. To attain money, they stalk and kill a bourgeois woman withdrawing money at an ATM machine. At first Manu and Nadine are vaguely repelled by the violence that has entered their lives. Yet, as they begin to bond, the women find release through killing their oppressors: the bourgeoisie in general, and males in particular. Along the way, they have sex with a number of men. Some of the men are killed, others survive, and their survival is predicated more or less on satisfying the women sexually and not being chauvinistic or insensitive with their own sexual demands.

Despite the purported ‘extremity’ of some of these themes, one scene in particular provoked the demand to censor, if not ban outright, the film: the aforementioned rape. The scene, which opens the film, lies at the heart of the censorship debate surrounding *Baise-moi*. The casting of Bach and Anderson – both hard-core porn actors – in the main roles has also fuelled the controversy. Their presence allows for hard-core sex to become a key part of the film’s narrative and has thereby led many critics to position *Baise-moi*, no matter

3 Joseph W. Slade ‘The porn market and porn formulas: the feature film of the seventies’ in Michael T. Marsden, John G. Nachbar, Sam L. Grogg, Jr (eds) *Movies as Artifacts: Cultural Criticism of Popular Film* (Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall, 1982), p. 153

4 J. Hoberman ‘Conspirators of pleasure’, *Village Voice* 4–10 July 2001

5 The question of the title’s translation is of interest. The literal translation *Fuck Me* was not used in Britain and North America because of the perhaps obvious problems of marketing a film with *fuck* in its title. Yet to argue that *Rape Me* is somehow more acceptable is perverse for two reasons: first, the trajectory of the film’s narrative, where violent rape in part sets the stage for the women’s murder spree-road trip; and second, the fact that raping is somehow more socially and politically acceptable than fucking as a marketing strategy.

what the directors' actual intents, as a *de facto* porn movie – this in spite of the fact that porn films are often critiqued for their lack of narrative cohesion.

While it is the interstitial nature of the film and its resistance to classification as either art cinema or hardcore that provokes the censors into action, this indeterminacy also provides the film's emotional and critical impact. Hoberman describes *Baise-moi* as 'a more existential *Thelma & Louise* made as cruddy-looking hardcore, *Baise-moi* has its two porn-star heroines engage in a mad rondo of senseless fucking and sucking and robbing and killing, all the while criticizing their own lack of imagination.'⁶ Self-reflexivity plays a key role in *Baise-moi* and the film's intertexts include European new wave cinemas, 1970s feminist cinema and contemporary Hollywood's representation of female violence (and the different strategies adopted by these movements to examine feminist politics and the representation of women). Critics partake in a related form of intertextuality: their frantic invocation of intertexts is precisely an attempt to classify the film, and indeed, it does help to place *Baise-moi*, a film which some have argued has no redeeming values, as part of a tradition. While the film is often compared to Ridley Scott's *Thelma & Louise* (US, 1991), one can also cite Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (US, 1976) as an unacknowledged precursor. This analogy becomes clear at the conclusion of the women's road trip, as Manu and Nadine eliminate what they see to be the scum of the earth, which climaxes with a violent murder spree at a libertine club. The scene culminates with Manu inserting a gun into the anus of one of the men in the club, and quite literally blowing his brains out.

The onscreen presence of this intense violence directed towards men is central to the film on two levels. First, the escalation of violence throughout the film gives *Baise-moi* its emotional power and, perhaps unexpectedly, its sense of humour. As crucial is the fact that an unspoken argument for censoring *Baise-moi* is often couched in the anger the reviewers feel not only about the rape scene itself, but also at the fact that, for the most part, the violence is directed towards men.

Yet, the violence in the film and the actions of Manu and Nadine demonstrate a certain self-consciousness (perhaps *Baise-moi* can be described as *nouvelle vague* pornography). They talk about how to conclude their shooting spree with a 'proper' form of suicide, what would make for good headlines, and how their story would conclude if indeed it were a film. They chide themselves for not being creative enough in their actions and their dialogue. This self-consciousness on the part of Despentès and Trinh-Thi signals an awareness about the ways in which critics and the public interpret and react to violent images. Furthermore, it points to the fact that *Baise-moi* is self-reflexive about its status as *grand guignol* cinema. To this extent, its

self-consciousness demonstrates that *Baise-moi* is a far more intelligent film than many critics claim. This self-consciousness is demonstrated in one scene in particular near the film's conclusion – a male intellectual gives a spiel on how he understands the two women and how he knows what motivates their pain. For an instant, one half expects his pseudo-intellectual rhetoric to work, but Manu and Nadine kill him nonetheless. This moment, where a bourgeois-intellectual male is eliminated because of his fatuous rhetoric, summarizes the filmmakers' quite self-conscious response to the paternalistic male offering his 'authoritative', privileged interpretation of Manu and Nadine's actions and their meaning – indeed, the man could be a film critic or, for that matter, a film censor.

It was against the backdrop of female sexuality and violence that the 'scandal' of *Baise-moi* unfurled. The controversy surrounding the film began as soon as it was released. Opening in Paris in June 2000, the film was limited to those of sixteen years and older, with the following warning posted in theatres: 'This film contains prolonged sex scenes of an extremely explicit nature and scenes of graphic violence, which some viewers may find shocking and disturbing'. This warning was not enough for rightist moral and political watchdog groups in France. Three days after the film opened, under pressure from the far-right, pro-family values group Promouvoir, the French government, having previously approved the certification of the film as '16+', pulled *Baise-moi* and reclassified it as '18+', in essence an X-Rating. Following Promouvoir, the government then proclaimed that *Baise-moi* 'constitutes a pornographic message and an incitement to violence'. Invoking the 1975 law that established the X-Rating in France, the film was essentially removed from distribution, as X-Rated theatres in France disappeared with the advent of home video pornography. Indeed, in all of France, only one licensed sex theatre remains open, located in the Parisian capital. This act of *de facto* censorship marked the beginning of what was referred to in the Parisian press as 'L'affaire *Baise-moi*'.

While by law, one could no longer screen the film outside of venues licensed for the sex-trade, Marin Karmitz, a Parisian Left Bank exhibitor who runs the MK2 Odéon cinemas, refused to stop screening the film. It was outside his venue that Desportes and Trinh-Thi, along with Claire Denis, Tonie Marshall, Romain Goupil, Jean-Luc Godard and other French cinéastes, engaged in a protest decrying the State's censorship of the film. Breillat, director of the earlier art-porn, *épater la bourgeoisie* film *Romance*, initiated a petition to support the general release of the film. Parisian magazines such as *Nouvel Observateur* and *Libération* ran major pieces on the controversy and *Libération* also set up a web page to cover the debate surrounding the film. While many critics had moral, political or ethical concerns about the film, the notion that censorship was the

answer to the problems posed by *Baise-moi* was for the most part dismissed as repressive. In France, where depictions of sex onscreen usually go unremarked by the popular press, the images of *Baise-moi* touched a nerve until then unknown. Foreshadowing the film's release in other countries, the problem posed by Desportes's and Trinh-Thi's film was a profound concern over the blurring of boundaries between mainstream and pornographic cinema that were previously understood as resolutely distinct. If the boundaries between mainstream and pornography were malleable, how could the State and the censor board 'reasonably' legislate against the *bête noir* of the Right: the supposedly rampant spread of violent pornography? This was the largely unspoken anxiety that propelled many of the attacks on the film.

Versions of this censorious scenario have followed the film's opening in other cities around the globe. Similar cases of censorship arose in Ontario, Canada, New Zealand and in Britain. While feminist film scholar Kay Armatage, who programmed the film for the Toronto International Film Festival, argued '*Baise-moi* is an audacious and challenging film. Not just a provocation, it is a revolt – against puritanism, against the hypocrisy of public morality, against the prevailing order of tasteful aesthetics, against the efforts to contain excess. *Baise-moi* is in your face – abrasive, gritty and disturbing,' others found its violence to be appalling.⁷ The Ontario Film Review Board (OFRB), for instance, refused to release the film without cuts to the opening rape scene. The Board's justification, as put forth by OFRB chair Bob Warren to Toronto journalist Jason Anderson, was that 'Our criteria for mainstream movies is that any explicit sex has to be limited, brief and non-violent. If it's not limited, it goes into the adult sex category. If it's not brief, it goes into the adult sex category. If it's violent, it doesn't go anywhere.'⁸ Leaving aside the negligible semantic differences between what constitutes 'limited' and 'brief', by these criteria, even if the act of violent penetration was cut from the rape scene, any video release would need to be displayed amongst other adult films, and not as a mainstream (that is, non-pornographic) film. The reason for this is obvious: the film is about fucking and killing. As sex and violence are intrinsically linked throughout the film, no matter what was excised from *Baise-moi* it could not get past the 'violence' clause of the regulation.

After much debate, the film was released with the penetration shot cut, but *Baise-moi* was banned from cineplexes and drive-ins, so that minors could not sneak in from other screenings. Therefore the film could only be shown in single-screen houses, again limiting the film's distribution because of the relative scarcity of these venues.

Protesting the OFRB's decision, Canadian filmmaker Atom Egoyan wrote a letter to the *Toronto Star*. Egoyan notes that while the screening of *Baise-moi* at the Toronto Film Festival offended many,

7 Kay Armatage, *Baise-moi*
Toronto International Festival
Program 2000 (Toronto: TIFF
2000).

8 Jason Alexander 'Bound and
gagged: artistically important
Baise-moi banned in Ontario. *The
Eye* 14 December 2000.

'others left the theatre excited, or moved, or completely neutral. All these people were trusted with making up their own minds. This is how civilized, democratic societies work. The decision to ban a film that has not contravened the criminal code is a serious affront to the community standards of an enlightened culture.' Other Canadian and Québécois filmmakers, such as Patricia Rozema and Denys Arcand, also protested the OFRB's act of censorship, but to no avail. Interestingly, in the neighbouring province of Québec, *Baise-moi* ran without incident until the fifth week of its release, when a viewer, after having watched most of the film in Le Parisien, a theatre in downtown Montréal, stormed the projection booth and stole the last reel, while decrying what he had seen onscreen. This incident aside, the film was, for an independent release, a success in the province, taking in \$Cn250,000.00 in the first two months.

If the OFRB's ruling was to be expected – it is one of the most censorious boards in the Western world, most notoriously censoring the National Film Board of Canada's stridently anti-pornographic *Not a Love Story: a Film About Pornography* (Canada, 1981) because of its inclusion of hard-core pornographic images – then the British Board of Film Classification's (BBFC) ruling was a bit more unexpected.⁹ In the last few years, most notably with the release of *Romance* and *The Idiots*, the BBFC had shown restraint in cutting films, refraining from overt acts of censorship, and at times enraging the UK's rightwing tabloids in the process. That tack was changed with the release of *Baise-moi*. The BBFC's report on *Baise-moi* released on 26 February 2001 ordered only one cut: the removal of the closeup of vaginal penetration during the graphic rape scene – the same sequence of film that the Ontario censors found unacceptable. Their justification for this cut is worth exploring. In their judgement, they write, in part:

The Board's policy on sexual violence . . . warns that, where the portrayal eroticizes sexual assault, cuts are likely to be required at any classification level. Additionally, any association of sex with non-consensual restraint, pain or humiliation may be cut. This policy is in part informed by the evidence of media effects research that violent pornography may excite aggressive responses from some male viewers. But the Board also recognizes that the graphic presentation of violent non-consensual sex is unlikely to be acceptable to the British public at any level. For these reasons, the Board concluded that one particular shot was unacceptable. Its extreme sexual imagery is unmatched elsewhere in the rape scene. Without it, the sequence remains a compelling portrayal of the ugliness and horror of rape. With it, the scene takes on a more explicitly pornographic dimension and is a matter of serious concern.¹⁰

Despite the lack of sources to make a case for the Board's highly

9 Not only the right-wing censors in Ontario but also some commentators on the left saw *Not a Love Story* as a film that replicated aspects of the voyeurism of pornography. See Hart Cohen 'Not a Love Story: knowledge, power and pornography' *Cine tracts* no. 16 (1982), pp. 4–6, and B. Ruby Rich 'Anti-porn soft issues: hard world' in Patricia Erens (ed.) *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) pp. 405–17.

10 BBFC Cuts *Baise-moi* bbfc.co.uk/archive/2001

dubious claim about 'media effects' research and their findings, serious questions arise from the BBFC's report. The notion of what constitutes pornography, always a contentious issue, is raised by the judgement. Furthermore, the tension between, on the one hand, the legalistic requirements of censorship and, on the other, what the 'British public' would find acceptable, highlight the fact that two very different sets of criteria are in play. Indeed, the reference to what the 'public' will stand is far more about stemming controversy than it is about strict censorship guidelines; the 'public' here is that of middle-England morality, not of legalistic jurisdiction. Because the BBFC is built on dual principles (to censor anything legally obscene and to avoid releasing images that will offend the 'British public') it necessarily runs into trouble with its interpretation of the film.

What is also of note in the BBFC's decision is its claim that cutting the scene of penetration from the rape is done in order to eliminate the possibility of the spectator viewing the act as sexually stimulating or pornographic. Yet, this point is undercut by the fact that the rape itself provokes an intense sense of unease. Furthermore, in terms of the film's formal strategies, the rape is not structured in a manner consistent with heterosexual, hardcore imagery. This is backed up by virtually all of the reviews of *Baise-moi* – even the harshest critics of the film find it repellent and not titillating in the least.

Nevertheless, some reviewers claim that *maybe* some audience member could be influenced by the film's images of rape. This critical voice in some ways replicates some of the arguments found in 1970s feminist theory and practice. For instance, in Anne-Claire Poirier's *Mourir à tue-tête/A Scream from Silence* (Québec, 1979) two women filmmakers discuss the rape scene they are editing in post-production (and that viewers have just seen onscreen). As the filmmakers discuss whether or not they have structured the film in such a way as to avoid voyeurism and sexual arousal on the part of male spectators (this disavowal of voyeurism is undertaken by putting the *cinéma vérité* camera in the subjective place of the rape victim), one of the filmmakers tells the other that she showed the rough cut of the scene to her partner, who found the moment when the rapist ripped off the victims' clothes with a knife arousing. Unlike the BBFC, however, Poirier's film leaves the rape scene in the film, despite the quandary it poses in regards to the tension between intention and reception. On the other hand, by making the rape in *Baise-moi* more palpable by cutting out the closeup of forced penetration – the act that provokes the narrative trajectory of the rest of the film – the BBFC succeed at trivializing both the violence that follows and the intensely serious reasons behind it.

The conclusion of the report adopts a tone that one does not often find in the language of the censor. The Board does note that 'It should be acknowledged that *Baise-moi*, contrary perhaps to early

reports of its reception in France, is a serious and well-made film. It concerns the reaction of two young women to the violence and humiliation habitually visited on them by men. It represents an important viewpoint. Here, to justify their decision, the censors become film critics by dismissing the comments made by other critics and attempting to place the film under the rubric of serious cinema and not exploitative pornography. They conclude by stating: 'There will be many different views about the merits of this film. Indeed, media commentary in this country has so far been largely critical. The Board's view, nonetheless, is that the film has a serious cultural purpose and offers an important perspective. We regret, however, the necessity to censor part of a film directed at a mature audience who may also reasonably expect to make up their own minds about it.' This does not sound like the typical language of the censor – the notion of the censor apologizing implies that the body sees itself as committing a wrongful act.

The apology on the part of the BBFC brings us back to the question raised earlier about the malleability of the boundary between art cinema and pornography. One of the central questions raised by *Baise-moi* is that of the status of pornography as a film genre. Unlike most film genres, the definition of cinematic pornography is as tied to legalistic questions as it is to stylistic ones. Yet, this tension, knowingly or not, demonstrates what exactly lies at the heart of the censorship debate. If a fiction film is deemed pornographic because it has no redeeming social function and only provides illicit titillation, then the precise nature of the images on the screen – regardless of sexual orientation, violent content or the appearance of non-consensual sex – should not play a role in the determination of pornographic content, because if there is content beyond prurient interest, the film is *de facto* not pornographic. That is, a more general understanding of the film's themes, motifs and intents is more important than the nature of the sexual act depicted. With this definition, *Baise-moi* should be judged by the same standards as *The Accused* (Jonathan Kaplan, US, 1988) or *Thelma & Louise*. If, however, the status of heterosexual, hardcore pornography is determined solely through the visual representation of penetration or through the presence of an erection, then the precise context of the act – be it consensual sex or violent rape – bears little weight in the determination of whether or not a film is pornographic in nature. What is interesting about the BBFC report is their claim that the act of violent penetration itself is what takes *Baise-moi* into the realm of pornography – a notion that is at odds with the new, contextual approach that is supposedly guiding the current BBFC.

The question that is left unanswered in the censorship debate surrounding *Baise-moi* is whether or not the film is of any interest beyond the realm of freedom of expression. While the film has been derided for its hand-held, amateur aesthetic – a stylistic choice

celebrated in the works of the Dogme '95 brethren – its revision of feminist filmmaking through the deployment of punk aesthetics (which, if one wished to find an antecedent, harkens back to Lizzie Borden's groundbreaking *Born in Flames* [US, 1983]), its reconfiguring of pornography as a cinematic genre, and its challenge to the way in which gender and sexuality are portrayed in mainstream and art cinema make *Baise-moi* a film that confronts many preconceived notions of dominant cinema. To this extent, *Baise-moi* is an important film, precisely because it does not offer easy answers, and disturbs and challenges audiences in the process. Instead of looking only to 'female violence' films such as *Thelma and Louise*, *La Femme Nikita* (Luc Besson, France, 1990) or *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, US, 1992) as antecedents, then, perhaps one should also consider the radical destabilisation of spectatorship undertaken in films such as Yvonne Rainer's *A Film about a Woman Who* (US, 1974), Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's *Riddles of the Sphinx* (UK, 1977), and Sally Potter's *Thriller* (UK, 1979), along with *Born in Flames*, as part of the tradition into which *Baise-moi* fits. While the politics of *Baise-moi* are more confused than those of the aforementioned films, the filmmakers' challenge the dominant paradigms of spectatorship and voyeurism (in this case, in regards to porn and action films) through a critique of pleasure and passive spectatorship recalls the challenges put forth by avant-garde feminist cinema in the 1970s. To this extent, *Baise-moi* can be seen as an amalgamation of the diversity of filmmaking practices that have addressed feminist concerns in the cinema over the last thirty years. Looking back on the radical cinema of the 1970s, Teresa de Lauretis has noted that:

contrary to what was perceived to be the common project of radical, independent, or avant-garde cinema in the sixties and seventies – namely the destruction of narrative and visual pleasure . . . I proposed feminist work in film should not be anti-narrative or anti-oedipal but quite the opposite. It should be narrative and oedipal with a vengeance . . . ¹¹

Perhaps *Baise-moi* was not the kind of cinema that de Lauretis was imagining, but Despentes's and Trinh-Thi's film responds to this call through its synthesis of pornography, the avant-garde, narrative and politics. Despite the work of censors, it is a film that will have to be reckoned with.

¹¹ Teresa de Lauretis 'Rethinking women's cinema aesthetics and feminist theory', in *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press 1987) p. 108.

report:

Midlands Television Research Group: 1999–2002

CATHERINE JOHNSON and RACHEL MOSELEY

1 Midlands Television Research
Group Report *Screen* vol 40
no 1 (1999) pp 88–90

The Midlands Television Research Group has continued to meet regularly since our last report in 1999,¹ a period in which we have seen the departure of longstanding members, Ian Goode, Jason Jacobs and Ros Jennings, but also welcomed the arrival of Catherine Johnson, Helen Hanson, Helen Wheatley and Helen Wood. The group meets to read and discuss new work in television studies, to present research and to think about what we have (and have not) watched, as well as to consider issues in teaching and learning about television. While we retain our sense that the group is an enjoyable, relaxed and stimulating forum outside of institutional pressures and the impetus to produce published ‘outcomes’, the group necessarily continues to form an important part of our various and shared television research cultures.

2 Jason Jacobs *Body Trauma TV: The New Hospital Dramas* (London: British Film Institute 2002)

3 Rachel Moseley and Jacinda Read ‘Having it *Ally*: popular television (post-) feminism’ *Feminist Media Studies* vol 2 no 2 (July 2002)

Recent research presentations have included *Television Medical Dramas*,² *The Heritages of Gothic Television*, *The Representation of the Fantastic in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer**, *Having it *Ally*: Popular Television (Post-)Feminism*,³ and *Inter-acting with Television*. Our reading has been informed by a perceived resurgence of the question ‘what is television studies?’ within critical discourses on television. In particular over the last two years we have engaged with a number of books and articles which are interested in retheorizing television and television studies in relation to the shifts in television broadcasting of the last fifteen years. In *Seeing Things: Television in*

the Age of Uncertainty, John Ellis argues for an understanding of the social function of television as a process of 'working through' that can be charted over three distinct periods in the history of television as a medium. Simon Frith's 'The Black Box: the value of television and the future of television research' draws on questions raised by the ESRC's Media Economics and Media Culture Research Programme to address the current state of television studies, and argues for television research that thinks across the dispersed fields of television studies. Georgina Born, one of the contributors to the Media Economics and Media Culture Research Programme, replies to Frith in 'Inside television: television studies and the sociology of culture' by arguing that television research needs to be reconnected to a reconstructed sociology of culture, with a disciplinary focus on production over consumption. Born's emphasis on the role of the 'media intellectual' draws on Garnham's insistence on the relevance of the notion of the intellectual in *Emancipation, the Media, and Modernity*, that explores more broadly the potentially emancipatory role of the media by historically tracing the current debates in media studies through the development of social and political theory since the Enlightenment.⁴ In discussing these books and articles we were particularly interested in the ways in which they variously engaged with the terms within which, historically, television has been studied, and presented a challenge to the current state of television studies. These debates encouraged us to address our own disciplinary backgrounds and research interests, to challenge how we were conceptualizing television (as a text, a technology, a social force, and so on), and to explore the links and differences between these approaches. Thus we questioned the consequences of a call such as that made by Frith for studies that engaged with the institutions, texts and reception processes of television – a call that we felt was both already apparent within the field,⁵ but also potentially theoretically and methodologically problematic. As members of a group which approached and discussed television from a range of different perspectives (textual analysis, studies of production, audience studies) we questioned whether it was possible or even desirable to break down the disciplinary boundaries that make up the different approaches to television. The group questioned the extent to which, for example, a scholar from a film studies background undertaking textual analysis of television could engage with economic analyses of television without the requisite research training or theoretical background, and how these different kinds of analysis could be integrated within one project. Furthermore, we felt that the call for studies that explore production, text and audience may not necessarily break down the disciplinary boundaries in television, as different disciplines (such as film studies and media studies) historically have conceptualized the relationship between production, text and viewer in quite distinct ways. The group has proved to be a

4 John Ellis *Seeing Things Television in the Age of Uncertainty* (London: IB Tauris 2000). Simon Frith 'The Black Box: the value of television and the future of television research' *Screen* vol 41, no 1 (2000) pp 33–50. Georgina Born 'Inside television: television studies and the sociology of culture' *Screen*, vol 41 no 4 (2000), pp 404–24. Nicholas Garnham, *Emancipation, the Media and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000).

5 See for example: Tufte, *Living with the Rubbish Queen Telenovelas: Culture and Modernity in Brazil* (Luton: University of Luton Press 2000). Purnima Mankekar *Screening Culture: Viewing Politics: an Ethnography of Television Womanhood and National in Postcolonial India* (Durham: NC: Duke University Press 1999).

place where such different disciplinary perspectives and approaches to television can be productively debated in a manner that enables an exchange and integration of ideas without requiring all of us to adopt (or become experts in) each other's methodological and theoretical fields

We continued to explore this debate, reading Thomas Tufte's *Living with the Rubbish Queen*, a study of Brazilian telenovelas that brought together an analysis of production, text and audiences⁶ While Tufte's study seemed to exemplify the kind of methodological approach to television that was called for by Frith, including close analysis of textual production, it was also centrally concerned with asking what television could tell us about everyday life, a significant area of recent research that does not figure in Frith's model of television studies In particular, Tufte's exploration of the relationship between television and everyday life in lower-class Brazilian homes challenged the western concept of domestic space as a private sphere that inflected both Ellis's and Frith's models of television studies In the low-income Brazilian households that Tufte studied, television occupied a hybrid sphere between the public and the private, providing a site of interaction between the house and the street Our reading of Tufte highlighted the difficulty in constructing a single model of television or television studies that can account for the hybridity of television as an object. We followed up this debate in two ways Firstly, we explored in more depth the consequences of studies of non-western television for the dominant western paradigms of television and television studies by reading Leal and Penachionni⁷ Secondly, we read Anna McCarthy's *Ambient Television*,⁸ which challenged the dominant construction of television as a domestic medium by exploring television's placement and spectatorship outside of the home (mainly in the USA) in a number of local or space-based contexts. Whilst the group found McCarthy's conflation of 'television' and 'monitor' problematic, in that no distinction is made in this work between broadcast television, narrowcast site-specific television, co-axial inhouse networks and video, this work raised a number of intriguing questions about television spectatorship and, more broadly, about the object of television studies

It has become increasingly apparent over the years that the disciplinary differences within the group are partly generational The younger members of the group are more likely to have come through film studies and media studies programmes than from the more established fields in the arts and the humanities. As we noted in our original report, these generational differences have surfaced mainly around attitudes to public service broadcasting and through our different viewing practices In particular, younger members are more likely to have satellite, cable or digital television, and tend to be less attached to the formative debates that characterized the emergent television studies in the 1970s and 1980s These differences have

6 Tufte *Living with the Rubbish Queen*

7 Ondina Fachel Leal 'Popular taste and erudite repertoire: the place and space of television in Brazil' *Cultural Studies* vol 4 no 1 (1990) pp 19–29 Irene Penachionni 'The reception of popular television in Northeast Brazil' *Media Culture and Society* vol 6 (1984) pp 337–41

8 Anna McCarthy *Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Space* (Durham: NC: Duke University Press, 2001)

surfaced in our responses to the reading and were most apparent in our discussion of Nicholas Garnham's *Emancipation, the Media, and Modernity* with younger members tending to be more resistant to his attempts to reinscribe the current debates in television studies within a philosophical history of modernity and Enlightenment thought. By comparison, the transmission of *Big Brother* inverted these generational differences between those who were hooked or turned off by the programme, or simply did not watch it at all. This was revealed both in our varying abilities to recognize and identify members of the *Big Brother* household, as well as by our differing modes of viewing: late night and communal viewing, for instance, combined with discussion of the live transmission of the show on E4 as an interesting example of the values of intimacy, liveness and co-presence, as opposed to a mode of attention in which the show was picked up through 'duty' towards the end of its run. We went on to explore the rise in 'reality television' by reading Jon Dovey's *Freakshow*,⁹ which then raised a number of pedagogical questions how, and indeed if, we should teach 'reality television' programmes such as *Big Brother* on our television courses.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the group's research activity in the past three years has been what we have called our '8–9 Project'. The group has always been interested in thinking about the place of 'ordinary' television in television studies, as well as in our consideration of our own viewing habits and preferences, as we discussed in our first report in relation to the 'television canon' exercise the group performed at its inception. In relation to this, the group had discussed the initial stages of a paper on makeover programmes on daytime television in the Spring of 1997, and we had also begun to comment and deliver papers on the spread of modes of 'lifestyle'-oriented daytime programming (fashion, cookery, home and garden improvement), often in the form of the 'makeover', to the prime-time schedules, and in particular, to the hour between eight and nine o'clock.¹⁰ From our survey of programming trends in and around the 'eight-to-nine' slot since 1990, we noted the increase of hybrid factual entertainment formats in the form of lifestyle programming and docusoaps, and a proportional decrease of 'serious' factual programming including current affairs and documentary. We also identified other factual entertainment programming within the slot which had been 'invisible' to the majority of the group: the presence of pets, vets, children and crime.

As we began to think through the emergence, development and impact of this trend, it became clear that our interests in the slot differed methodologically, as has often been the case, historically, within the group. Some of us, for instance, were interested in television textuality and aesthetics, others in production, institutions and audiences. We were all, however, albeit in different ways, concerned to engage with notions of public service broadcasting.

9 Jon Dovey *Freakshow: First Person Media and Factual Television* (London: Pluto Press, 2000)

10 Charlotte Brunson 'Lifestyling Britain' in Jan Olsson and Lynn Spigel (eds), *The Persistence of Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002) Rachel Moseley 'Makeover takeover' *Screen* vol 41 no 3 (2000) pp 299–314

quality, the perceived 'dumbing down' of culture and the debates in the media which had begun to crystallize around the kind of television occupying 'eight-to-nine'. It was becoming clear, for instance, that the factual entertainment 'lifestyle' television broadcast in this slot was being perceived as indicative of a drop in the quality of British television. In particular, the 'softening up' or decline of 'serious' prime-time factual and current affairs programming was being perceived as calling the BBC's public service provision, in an increasingly competitive television landscape, into question. We were also, probably as a result of the variation in our viewing habits, interested in diverse generic instances of the trend. While we wanted to do a collective research project on the 'eight-to-nine' slot, we also felt that it was important to retain a sense of the diversity of interests, approaches and perspectives within the group, including our disagreements, which have always been our strength and an important source of intellectual stimulation.

'Eight-to-nine' continued to be an important focus for the group, alongside our other activities, as we developed and presented our research on the slot. The Third International Crossroads in Cultural Studies Conference, held at the University of Birmingham in June 2000, offered us an opportunity to present the research in the form of a panel. With papers focusing on different kinds of programming within the slot, and on issues including gender, address, public service, dumbing down, historical shifts in televisual grammar and television studies itself, we were thus able to retain a sense of our different concerns and perspectives under a group umbrella. The panel provoked a significant amount of interest and attention, resulting in the publication of the papers, with an account of the formation of the project, in the *European Journal of Cultural Studies* in January 2001.¹¹

Clearly, work in this area of television studies is just beginning, and it promises to be a lively and ongoing area of study. This is evidenced by papers presented at the Console-ing Passions Conference at the University of Bristol in July 2001, for instance. Annette Hill's paper 'Believe it or not: television audiences and factual entertainment', part of the panel called 'Female Practitioners and Viewers of Popular Factual Television'. In addition, the new ESRC Research Programme: Cultures of Consumption includes 'lifestyle' programming in its research areas. There is potential, therefore, through this funding initiative, for existing work to be contextualized in relation to questions of the production and reception of this expanding area of programming. As part of our ongoing research into lifestyle programmes, our annual end-of-year party required each member to contribute a television chef's dish. Guessing whose recipes people had followed revealed that our viewing in this area was wide. Our cooking, however, was narrower: most of our recipes turned out to be Delia Smith. Just like the

11 Charlotte Brunsdon, Catherine Johnson, Rachel Moseley and Helen Wheatley 'Factual entertainment on British television: The Midlands TV Research Group's "8-9" project', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* vol. 4, no. 1 (2001), pp. 29-62.

Oxford English Dictionary, it transpired that the Midlands Television Research Group ‘Delia’d’ when it wanted reliable, transportable party food!

The group remains a vibrant and valuable space for debate and intervention in the field, as well as an ongoing source of intellectual companionship and stimulation. We look forward to continuing to read, watch television and present research, and, through debate and discussion, to engage with questions of pedagogy in relation to television and television studies in an atmosphere in which the divisions and disagreements have been as productive as they have sometimes been difficult.

The Midlands Television Research Group Ann Gray Helen Wood (University of Birmingham) Tim O Sullivan (Leicester De Montfort University) Helen Hanson (formerly Warwick, now Exeter University), Catherine Johnson (formerly Warwick now Southampton University) Charlotte Brunsdon Rachel Moseley Helen Wheatley (University of Warwick)

reviews

review:

Eric Schaefer, *'Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!' A History of Exploitation Films, 1919–1959*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999, 474 pp.

JENNIFER CLARK

With the fervour of a tent revival evangelist or, perhaps more appropriately, a carnival barker, Eric Schaefer argues passionately for the importance of exploitation films in cinematic theory and history. These 'bad' movies should be considered not only as aesthetic products in their own right, but also as influences upon Classical Hollywood Cinema. Exhaustive in his archival research, Schaefer constructs a history of exploitation films ranging from 1919–1959 that rivals Bordwell, Thompson and Staiger's seminal survey of 'legitimate' cinema.¹ Unlike *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, Schaefer's study considers extensively the ideological implications of exploitation films. While he acknowledges the obviously conservative aspects of exploitation films, Schaefer argues for the radical challenges they pose to dominant ideologies. The very aspects that make the films 'bad' – fissures within and excesses of formal style, acting, exhibition, marketing, and reception – allow them to present progressive alternatives to mainstream ideologies. These various disruptions differentiate exploitation cinema from Classical Hollywood Cinema, while making them equally worthy of study.

The book is divided into two sections. Employing a broad historiographical approach in the first half, Schaefer traces the development and history of the exploitation film industry. In the second half, he defines subgenres within exploitation pictures, producing closer textual readings of individual movies within the categories of The Sex Hygiene Film; The Drug Film, Vice, Exotic

¹ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985).

and Atrocity Films; and Nudist and Burlesque Films. To expand the canon of film history and its methodological approaches, the book examines ideological messages, cultural contexts, audience responses, formal style, acting, production history and economics. Schaefer analyzes a number of texts (interviews with directors, producers, and actors; popular narratives, reviews; censorship memos, sexology reports; newspaper accounts of crime rings; print advertisements and archival photos of theatre exhibits) and employs multiple theoretical approaches (feminist theory, critical race theory, Marxism, narrative theory, cultural theory and close reading) to construct the most thorough treatment of exploitation cinema to date.

Right from the start Schaefer begins his defence of exploitation films. Chapter One redefines the field of study, remedying previous imprecision and error in delimiting the parameters of exploitation cinema. To Schaefer, the definitional laxity to date is part of the critical neglect of these films. Deriving its name from the 'practice of exploitation, advertising or promotional techniques that went over and above typical posters, trailers and newspaper ads', an exploitation film is not a B film nor hardcore pornography, but rather a movie with the following characteristics: a forbidden topic, cheap production by small independent companies, independent distribution, exhibition in theatres not affiliated with the majors, and a long release time period with few prints in circulation (pp. 4–6). After specifying the field, Schaefer constructs a painstaking and convincing case for exploitation's unique and deliberate aesthetic elements. Ultimately, Schaefer argues not only for a planned, artful style of the pictures, but also asserts that Hollywood cinema may owe a thing or two to their innovations.

Schaefer's extended treatment of the foundations of the exploitation are interesting on their historical merit, but more importantly, for the convincing argument they create about the politicized issues involved with censorship, the goals of sensationalism, and the shifting definitions of 'taste'. Schaefer links the ideology of exploitation cinema with the white slavery films of the early teens that established the tradition of linking illicit subject material with cultural fears of a racialized, sexualized Other. Rooted in the progressive movement aimed at managing the rise of immigration and industrialization, the white slavery film was both fascinated with and repulsed by racial integration and the risks it posed to normative citizenship. Able to provide audiences with morally questionable, racy material, the white slavery film justified its existence with its educational reform project.

Though a short-lived genre, the white slavery film laid important ideological foundations for exploitation cinema. The sex hygiene film, the ur-text of exploitation cinema, soon followed, reproducing the same politics as did the white slavery movie. As marginalized racial and economic groups 'made specific demands regarding

working and living conditions' and 'appeared to require special treatment to be socialized', white, middle-class America responded to its 'sense of loss of control over the reproduction of a class and way of life', with cautionary tales of race suicide (p. 23). In the pivotal sex hygiene film *Damaged Goods* (1937), the protagonist, a young, successful, white male lawyer, contracts syphilis from a prostitute, then infects his young, white socialite wife and their baby. Although this film, typical for early exploitation films, seems titillating and 'forbidden' in its depiction of sexuality, it escaped censorship and was lauded for its educational merits.

As long as sensational movies protected the interests of the white middle class by educating about the ills of interacting with undesirables, sex hygiene was permissible fodder. Schaefer discovers an abrupt withdrawal of favour from the sex hygiene film co-existent with the release of three military training films: *Fit to Fight* (1918), *Fit to Win* (1919), and *The End of the Road* (1918). These films departed from the traditional sex hygiene in important ways. They included graphically realistic depictions of VD, emphasized birth control rather than abstinence, conflicted with Hollywood's attempt to 'upgrade its public image', challenged the industry's stabilization around the feature-length narrative film and its conventions, and represented VD's carriers as classless (p. 30). The last factor carries the most weight with Schaefer; he foregrounds class anxiety throughout the rest of his book. This new breed of sex hygiene films ignores the invasion of the bourgeois home. Instead VD affects the 'egalitarian world' of the military, shifting the threat of contamination from the poor who destroy the middle class to a new breed of 'equal-opportunity diseases' (p. 33).

The thoroughness and complexity of its historical analysis is the book's greatest strength. The exploitation film fulfilled an important role in culture because it answered social needs that mainstream Hollywood could and would not. Schaefer considers, through historiography, cultural theory and narrative analysis, the increased professionalization of the medical field and its protective stance about health concerns, the restrictive nature of Hollywood conventions and its concerns about its moral image, the rise of discourses around sexology and its racial issues, and the conversion of US economy from a classical political economy with 'production as the ultimate end of economic activity' to a 'neoclassical or marginalist economy' that saw 'consumption as the ultimate end' (p. 40). Although Schaefer approaches the topic through a variety of theoretical lenses, his Marxist analysis trumps all others. While acknowledging the racial, gender and sexual problematics of the films, Schaefer privileges economics as the dominant blueprint for analysis. Regardless of the anxieties represented – homosexuality, girls gone bad, racial 'impurity' – Schaefer locates it in historical concerns surrounding production and consumption. The social concerns

expressed in exploitation cinema eventually lead back to fears surrounding the nonproductive citizen in Schaefer's analysis.

As Schaefer moves into the second half of the book, his Marxist leanings become more evident. He returns to the sex hygiene film, considering its class conflicts and concerns of production and consumption. With impressive film examples and historical documents to support his claims, this chapter stands out as the most thorough and convincing of his film interpretations. Overtly concerned with 'race suicide', the sex hygiene film also expresses class concerns about middle-class girls no longer tied to modes of respectable labour production within the family. They are now female consumers armed with relative independence and expendable cash. To control gender, racial and sexual anxiety surrounding the liberated woman in the consumer age, her consumption must be appropriately geared to the family unit once again. In his chapters on both the sex hygiene and the drug film, Schaefer continues to interweave concerns about identity with class anxiety. As with the sexually promiscuous woman, the 'homosexual problem' of the emasculated man in the post-World War II culture is subsumed into economic terms. Othered by his '[i]nability to enter the proper position as a postwar consumer', the feminized/gay male's inability to engage with heterosexual family practices and labour prevents him from integrating into mainstream society (p. 215). Similarly, drug users became a problem only when they could no longer work, a move from the pitiable victim of drug use (the Civil War veteran, the upper-class matron, the child given too much patent medicine) to the eventual threat of postwar juvenile delinquents who violated the productive, white middle-class nuclear family with their subcultural activities.

After dealing expansively in sex hygiene and drug films, the scope of the study narrows towards its conclusion, starting with the chapter on vice, exotic and atrocity films. At this point, Schaefer's analysis of race, while running throughout his interpretation of class, is considered on its own terms. In addition, the chapter examines fewer examples, perhaps out of material scarcity, though Schaefer never explains this. Schaefer does continue his economic analysis in the exotic film's representation of a racial utopia where women do not challenge masculinity, and men's "'manliness'" and value would not be so thoroughly entwined with his capacity to earn money and buy goods' (p. 272). The simplistic racial dynamics of the films offer little material for consideration, a potential stumbling block for a researcher committed to proving the complexity of the materials in question. Using this simplicity, along with the films' inauthenticities, Schaefer interprets the overtly constructed nature of the subgenre as a disruptive challenge to their racism.

Disruption is the key to Schaefer's hopeful analysis of an otherwise conservative message of exploitation cinema. Both

cinematic and extracinematic factors created this disruption. Exhibition of the films was accompanied by lectures promised to both titillate and to educate, and were often part of the overall 'ballyhoo' quality of the show that promised audiences more than it could ever deliver. This extravagance, along with the actual interruptions posed to the film by such carnival practices, posed alternatives to Classical Hollywood Cinema's orderly, passive spectator. With rushed shooting schedules and limited budgets, exploitation privileged spectacle over the narrative, downplayed acting, and created a unique aesthetic style. These economic constraints, combined with the multiple edits required for regional censorship standards, created recycled and disjointed films. As a result, viewers did not move seamlessly from narrative to spectacle, as they did in Hollywood narrative cinema. Rather, the excessive spectacle of exploitation film 'stood out in relief from the shambling wreck of the diegesis' (p. 80). It is this version of spectacle that questions the conventional ideology of the gaze so famously theorized by Laura Mulvey. Schaefer correlates the importance of the jarring nature of spectacle in the exploitation film to the Kuleshov effect to produce a 'delirium' in the audience that offers them 'interpretive leeway' to the overt ideological project of these films (p. 94).

After fostering this argument on disruption throughout the book, Schaefer puts it to focused use in his chapter on nudist and burlesque films. By this point in the book, he has proven the thoroughness of his research and his accuracy in the cataloguing of films. The relatively few examples, combined with the difficulty of the argument Schaefer poses, makes the chapter's claims feel slightly out of step with the rest of the book. Schaefer defends the films in the face of challenging subject material and feminist critiques. Perceiving the burlesque film as relatively harmless in the face of the Kinsey report, *Playboy*, and pinups, Schaefer notes the nostalgic 'innocence' typical of the exploitation picture, this generic characteristic, along with cultural contextualization, supports Schaefer's argument that naked women parading onscreen for male spectatorial pleasure is relatively harmless. In fact, the movies offer liberation to women. Outside the sphere of 'domestication' the burlesque woman is 'free' to express her sexuality through her performance. Her performance, along with the self-deprecating routines of male comics that were often interspliced, counterbalance the sexism of the films.

To further prove the emancipatory potential of the burlesque film, Schaefer again turns to contextualization and comparison. Interpreting the women in Classical Hollywood films of the 1950s as 'contained through ideological institutional apparatuses such as the Production Code, narrative means. Or both,' Schaefer lauds the active woman of the burlesque film (p. 312). Using *The Tender Trap*, *The Seven Year*

Lich, and *Pillow Talk* to demonstrate his point, Schaefer sees the mainstream films' women 'displayed' only 'as passive, available and controlled mates or potential mates' (p. 312). While certain factions within feminist theory would agree heartily, Schaefer's argument depends upon the reader's acceptance of Classical Hollywood films as unquestionably controlling, as unified ideological projects. In addition, issues of pleasure in male spectatorship remain unresolved. Certainly the examination of the male comedians' performances would be enriched by feminist theorists, most notably Patricia Mellencamp, who theorize issues of male narrative power controlling female performance. Drawing upon feminist theories of performativity and hyperfemininity useful in questioning traditional feminist dismissals of sexualized representations of women, Schaefer interprets the strippers' performances and the formal elements surrounding them as liberatory and parodic. In his final defence of the burlesque film, Schaefer identifies a 'pure' moment of identity. During the stripper's disrobing, gender is stripped away and what 'remains is flesh that is mere flesh, without social connotation' (p. 317). The claim, while enticingly optimistic, assumes an unmediated body and overlooks the mediating presence of the camera, the cinematic apparatus and audience interpretation. Schaefer's reclamation of the burlesque film, in particular, raises provocative questions worth exploring further.

The tenacity with which Schaefer pursues his primary arguments about the value of exploitation cinema parallels the challenges he overcame in researching his topic. Unearthing artefacts of 'low' cultural history, Schaefer meticulously catalogues the field while proving that the theoretical attention he pays to the field is both merited and long overdue. Based on his dissertation, Schaefer's book stands alone in the field of study. With his passionate appeals to readers to reconsider the importance of otherwise dismissed movies, other books are sure to follow. While this may seem redundant, given the scrupulous nature and grand scale of this book, Schaefer's theoretical perspectives and provocative claims leave room for further elaboration within this field.

review:

Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski between Theory and Post-Theory*. London: British Film Institute, 2001, 213 pp.

EMMA WILSON

Žižek's title, *The Fright of Real Tears*, is explained in the fourth chapter of the volume. Žižek cites Kieślowski on his decision to renounce documentary for feature filmmaking sometime in the late 1970s: 'I managed to photograph some real tears several times. It's something completely different. But now I've got glycerine. I'm frightened of real tears. In fact, I don't even know whether I've got the right to photograph them. At such times I feel like somebody who's found himself in a realm which is, in fact, out of bounds. That's the main reason why I escaped from documentaries' (p. 72). For Žižek, in a typically acute revelation, 'it was precisely a fidelity to the Real that compelled Kieślowski to abandon documentary realism – at some point, one encounters something more Real than reality itself' (p. 71). This thinking on reality and the Real is key to Žižek's reading of Kieślowski and to the volume as a whole. While focusing on the abandonment of documentary, in a brilliant twist, Žižek contends that in his feature films, Kieślowski's recourse to the theme of alternative realities is propelled by the same tension between documentary and fiction. Commenting that documentary shooting results in 'an over-abundance of uncoordinated material, in large part generated by unforeseeable contingencies' (p. 76), Žižek argues that 'even in his fiction films, Kieślowski *treats the footage as documentary material* which, consequently, should be decimated, so that all that remains are fragments which are never fully comprehensible, i.e. in whose final cut something – the element that

would provide the crucial clarification – is always missing’ (pp. 76–7, emphasis in original). This leads to the conclusion that, far from ‘ethereal spirituality’, the contingencies and mysterious links found in Kieślowski’s late feature films are grounded in the persistence of the documentary approach to the very end of his filmmaking.

Žižek realigns dominant readings of Kieślowski with breathtaking ingenuity and precision. He offers a darker interpretation (p. 93) of Kieślowski’s universe, one that is enduring and engrossing. Pursuing his dismissal of ‘new age’ (his term) readings of the films, Žižek recalls the use of filters by Sławomir Idziak, cinematographer in *A Short Film about Killing* (1988). Through the greenish colour created, the world looks, for Kieślowski, ‘much crueller, duller and emptier’ (p. 93). The viewer’s vision is partial, impeded, the reality viewed appears imperfectly constituted. By analogy, for Žižek, ‘Kieślowski’s universe is one created by a perverse, confused and idiotic God who screwed up the work of Creation, producing an imperfect world, and then tried to save whatever could be saved by repeated new attempts’ (p. 94). Both the alternative realities within Kieślowski’s films (*Blind Chance* [1981] and *The Double Life of Véronique* [1991]) and the repetitions implied by Kieślowski’s attempts to retell the same story offer evidence of this idea of multiple imperfect universes, “‘reality’” itself is thus multiplied into the spectral plurality of virtual realities, beneath which lurks the pre-ontological proto-reality, the Real of the unformed ghastly matter’ (p. 95).

Žižek has written on Kieślowski before, notably on the two films *A Short Film about Killing* and *A Short Film about Love* (1988), the two feature-length versions of *Decalogue 5* and *6* (1988).¹ For Žižek, previously, *A Short Film about Killing* showed the failure of ‘the metaphor of Law’; the punishment (hanging) for a young man’s meaningless murder of a taxi driver is an uncanny repetition of the crime. *A Short Film about Love*, in an argument to which Žižek returns in *The Fright of Real Tears*, is read as an introverted slasher film in which the man deals a blow to himself. The reader feels no impatience with the return of certain readings in Žižek, with their repetition and redefinition (which aligns Žižek’s universe with Kieślowski’s). One of the real treats of *The Fright of Real Tears* is Žižek’s willingness to linger over a series of works by a particular filmmaker, whom he has treated before. For the reader who has (fallibly) read Žižek for his coruscating and rapid observations on Hitchcock, Spielberg or David Lynch, *The Fright of Real Tears* seems like a vindication. More is better and this is it.

Yet *The Fright of Real Tears* is also more than a brilliant reading of Kieślowski, much more, as its subtitle intimates. In his introduction to the volume, Colin McCabe explains that the book grew out of a series of lectures that Žižek was invited to give at the

1 Slavoj Žižek ‘There is no sexual relationship’ in Renata Saleci and Slavoj Žižek (eds) *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 208–49.

2 David Bordwell and Noel Carroll
(eds) *Post-Theory
Reconstructing Film Studies*
(Madison WI: University of
Wisconsin Press, 1996)

National Film Theatre in 1998. MacCabe intended the lectures to address 'the weaknesses and insularity of film studies as they had developed in the university sector over the previous two decades' (p. vii). His aim in inviting Žižek was to bring to the British Film Institute 'someone who was passionately engaged with film, but who placed it in the widest possible intellectual and cultural context' (p. vii). In the first section of the book Žižek addresses current contradictions in today's cinema studies, broadly seen in the familiar divide between 'theory' and 'post-theory'. In particular, and with a certain lightness of touch, he critiques the volume *Post-Theory*, edited by David Bordwell and Noel Carroll.² More than defending 'theory', he seeks to demonstrate that theory can move on from the readings of Lacan operative in the 1970s and 1980s, for Žižek, 'there is "another Lacan" reference to whom can contribute to the revitalisation of the cinema theory' (p. 7).

The emergence of this 'other Lacan' is felt in particular in chapters two and three, in Žižek's return to questions of suture and the gaze. Indeed, as Žižek states, nowhere is the gap between theorists and post-theorists so obvious as apropos of the gaze. Here and elsewhere in his argument, with vehemence and wit, Žižek unsettles spectatorship and reveals ways in which cinema is a privileged medium for highlighting the inner tension of our experience of reality. In returning to suture, Žižek explores its unstitching, examining, for example, the threat of a point-of-view shot which will not clearly be allocated as the point of view of some protagonist, evoking instead the spectre of a free-floating gaze. Žižek specifically tests the points where the exchange of subjective and objective shots fails to produce the suturing effect. This allows him to explore the function of 'interface', which takes place when suturing no longer works. He explains the notion (in which a part of reality starts to function as a door of perception) through a series of examples from Kieślowski. The most resonant is the closeup shot of Julie's eye from the beginning of *Blue* (1993). While the eye almost covers the whole screen, the external reality, the doctor approaching Julie, is seen only as a reflection in the eye. As Žižek argues, 'it is reality *itself* which is reduced to a spectre appearing *within* the eye's frame' (p. 52). This disturbance of perceptions of reality through interface is traced with further virtuosity in comparison between *The Double Life of Véronique* – in which Véronique looks into a crystalline glass ball, and as she focuses on its magic interior we see the reality around it dissolve into a formless smear – and *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941). The magnetic pull of Žižek's words forces the films to warp and refocus before our eyes. He sums up with eye-watering acuity, 'we cannot ever comprehend the "whole" of reality that we encounter: if we are able to endure our encounter with reality, some part of it has to be "derealised", experienced as a spectral apparition' (p. 68). This he teaches us through Kieślowski

In the introduction Žižek explains that he will refer to Kieślowski's work 'in order to accomplish the *work of Theory*' (p. 9). The volume depends on an extraordinary interface between Žižek's intervention in debates in cultural theory and Kieślowski's films. Examples from Kieślowski offer substance, clear shimmering material in which Žižek identifies his arguments on suture, on the gaze, on film's rendering of reality as unfathomable. Yet, inversely, these observations in turn redraw readings of Kieślowski. These two effects, together, result in one of the greatest interventions in recent film theory and criticism, making this volume a singular and soaring achievement.

The Fright of Real Tears is evidence of what cinema studies can aspire to. It may be less programmatic than *Post-Theory*, which envisages certain (practical) changes in the field and its methodologies. By contrast, adopting Žižek's methods seems a far trickier (or hopeless) task. Cinema studies is enriched in its diversity by cognitivist and historicist approaches. Yet the spectacular force of Žižek on film reverberates through the discipline. Readers may hesitate at rare moments – encountering the idea of the invisible frame dismissed as bluff (p. 5) yet returning in later discussion (p. 130), noticing that it is Olivier's eye, not Julie's, which is seen at the end of *Blue* (p. 125), or trying to sidestep Žižek on lesbianism and fantasy (p. 91). At times the reader finds herself grasping for meaning, missing encounters with Žižek, yet still the rewards of the volume are enormous. Beyond film theory and Kieślowski, *The Fright of Real Tears* also offers remarkable glancing readings of other recent films. *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999) is brilliantly dismissed in a footnote; a lengthier note offers a corrective to critical respect for *Shoah* (Claude Lanzmann, 1985). *Magnolia* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 1999) is identified as the closest Hollywood can come to Kieślowski, yet Žižek is also alive to warps in reality in numerous other contemporary films, his examples, exhilarating in their own terms, also implicitly demonstrate the range and grip of his central theses on film.

The Fright of Real Tears reminds us that real (or Real) theory can show how cinema exposes the fragility of subjectivity and our failure to grasp the whole picture of reality. Films, analyzed by Žižek, reveal both the missed encounter with reality and the closed loop of fantasy which we watch, 'eyes wide shut'.

review:

Martha McCaughey and Neal King (eds), *Reel Knockouts: Violent Women in the Movies*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2001, 279 pp.

KAREN BOYLE

Women's violence – on the screen, on the page, on the streets and in the home – long a source of popular fascination and repulsion, is a relatively new focus for feminist analysis. The representation of real and fictional violent women has, however, received significant critical treatment from feminists in the past ten years – most accessibly in the collection *Moving Targets: Women, Murder and Representation*, with Lynda Hart's *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* providing the theoretical weight.¹ The real strengths of these texts and, indeed, of the best feminist scholarship on gendered violence more generally, are that they are interdisciplinary in their thinking and clearly grounded in feminist theories emerging from both the academy and the grassroots. Martha McCaughey and Neal King make superficially similar claims for *Reel Knockouts*, which positions itself as 'the first book-length study of violent women in movies'. However, as a whole, *Reel Knockouts* is far less successful in elucidating why the analyses of individual violent women and the fictions which 'contain' them are worthy of our attention.

In their introduction, McCaughey and King claim, 'The contributions gathered here analyze violent women's respective places in the history of cinema, in the lives of viewers, and in the feminist response to male violence against women' (p.2). It is worth, briefly, considering the success of the collection in these terms. That the collection analyzes the place of violent women in the history of cinema is the claim that leaves me most puzzled, as the majority of

¹ Helen Birch (ed.) *Moving Targets: Women, Murder and Representation* (London: Virago 1993), Lynda Hart *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1994).

contributions focus on US fiction films of the last three decades and there is – disappointingly – no consideration of independent feminist film dealing with questions of women’s violence. The individual contributors grapple in various ways with the relationship between women’s violence and feminism, although feminist responses to male violence against women are taken for granted rather than elucidated. A clearer sense of social and political context – and, in particular, of the intersections of gender, race, sexuality and class in representing and understanding violence – would have added much for the reader unfamiliar with internal feminist debates.

However, it is McCaughey and King’s claim that the collection addresses the role of violent women in the lives of viewers which is most problematic. Admittedly, running through many of the chapters is a sense that the social relevance of movie women (violent or not) hinges on the ways in which ‘audiences’ engage with and respond to them, yet Tiina Vares’s chapter is the only one to deal explicitly with actual (female) audiences. Disappointingly, other contributors acknowledge ‘the audience’ only to assume that the critic can ‘read-off’ audience response from the text, critical responses or anecdotes supported by their own viewing experiences. Vares’s chapter, in contrast, usefully examines *diversity* among groups of women in their responses to the violence in *Thelma & Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991), providing a useful addition to the developing literature on contemporary film audiences. Even so, Vares leaves many questions frustratingly unanswered. For example, given the controversy generated by (some) women’s very *public* responses to cinema screenings of *Thelma & Louise*² it is puzzling that Vares offers no explanation for her decision not to consider viewing contexts. Neither is it clear whether the term ‘violence’ was introduced by the researcher or her respondents – a fairly fundamental issue if we are to understand how movie audiences make meaning of violence and examine the implications of viewer-response for regulation and exhibition. Hopefully, future publications using this data will provide clarification here.

Ultimately, it is not only the audience *within* the text, but the audience for *Reel Knockouts* itself which seems undefined. The introduction self-consciously addresses a general audience – offering signposts both for the academic and those ‘unconcerned with academic debates’ (p.11) in the opening pages – but without the *grounding* of *Moving Targets* I imagine its crossover appeal for feminists may be limited. On the other hand, while the specificity of the focus on violent women *in the movies* is highlighted, *Reel Knockouts* does not really work as a film studies text. Partly this is to do with a lack of detailed attention to individual film texts (with a few exceptions, such as Laura Grindstaff’s nuanced discussion of *Dolores Claiborne* [Taylor Hackford, 1995], the tendency is to more generalized discussions) and partly the under-engagement with film

2 See Marita Sturken *Thelma & Louise* (London: British Film Institute, 2000) for a summary of the critical controversy surrounding the film. Both the critical responses and anecdotal accounts provided by Sturken seem concerned with the *public* response of female viewers to the film’s theatrical release.

theory. Despite the editors' assurances that *Reel Knockouts* aims to take us beyond simplistic assignments of film texts as 'good' or 'bad', 'revolutionary' or 'reactionary', these are precisely the terms used by some of the contributors (Arons's opening chapter is particularly guilty of this). As a result, while some of the individual essays are indeed engaging, I was left wondering what these essays, individually and collectively, contribute to our knowledge of film, film theory, women's violence and the ways in which they interrelate

This sense of inbetween-ness is exacerbated by the book's organization into two sections – 'Genre Films' and 'New Bonds, New Communities' – whose themes are barely addressed by the contributors. Part One comprises six chapters covering the 'genres' of the Hong Kong kung fu film (Wendy Arons), stripper movies (Jeffrey A. Brown), the cop film (Carol M. Dole), women-in-prison films (Suzanna Danuta Walters) and films starring Sharon Stone (Susan Knobloch). Knobloch's study of Sharon Stone's star image in the 1990s is the most original and engaging, exploring the multiple levels of performance within and across these frequently homicidal roles, with detailed attention both to Stone's acting styles and critical responses to them. Nevertheless, defining Stone's films as a 'genre' is potentially problematic and 'genre' remains undefined by editors and contributors alike, providing little sense of coherence to the section.

A similar problem haunts Part Two. In their introduction, the editors state that they are envisaging 'bonds' and 'communities' in terms of "the uses of violent women in the larger feminist enterprise", asking, "how does women's brutality foster solidarity amongst the characters or their audiences?" (p. 8). The individual authors – Laura Grindstaff, Kimberly Springer, Barbara L. Miller, Tiina Vares, Judith Halberstam – examine bonds and communities between characters or between characters and audiences, but the communities of the 'larger feminist enterprise' are frequently elusive. Halberstam most clearly articulates the layered relationship between representations and community activism in 'Imagined Violence/ Queer Violence', and the questions she raises concerning how imagined rage and resistance can unsettle white male privilege are vital. However, the additions to her 1993 article are puzzling in the context of this volume. In a largely new section, Halberstam discusses the video documentary, *Silverlake Life: The View from Here* (Friedman and Joslin, 1993) which painfully records the AIDS-related death of the film's 'author', Tom Joslin. In confronting the spectator with the disintegrating authorial self, Halberstam argues that *Silverlake Life*, 'refuses to respect some tacit agreement between viewer and artist over the boundaries of the watchable' (p. 258). She makes a convincing case that in implicating the viewer in this way, the video (unlike the other representations discussed in this book)

‘insists upon an activist response’ (p. 261), and the links Halberstam herself makes between representation and activism are provocative. However, as the final chapter in a book about *violent women*, this seems curiously out of place. It does, perhaps, emphasize the difficulty of separating a consideration of women’s violence both from the (white, straight, male) ‘norm’ and from the other political struggles in which marginalized women and men are involved. However, in leaving this observation until last, there is almost a sense of ‘tokenism’ which simply highlights the lack of coherence in the collection as a whole.

Like so many edited collections, then, *Reel Knockouts* contains useful individual contributions, but is lacking in overall direction and purpose. The editors’ introductory claims make it appear to be a far more weighty and comprehensive volume (indeed, I doubt that any one book could cover everything they propose) and it is this more than the strength of individual contributions that makes *Reel Knockouts* such a frustrating cover-to-cover read.

review:

Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001, 363 pp.

LEE GRIEVESON

Lightning, the heroine in the serial *The Lightning Raider* (Pathé, 1919), searches in one episode for a bouquet of roses in which a villain has hidden a vial of deadly germs. The first place she looks happens to be the site of the yearly banquet of the Society for Anthropological Research, and just as a professor rises to read a paper entitled the 'Inferiority of the Female Brain Cavity', beginning, 'From the natural timidity of the female, I deduce', she blasts in through the balcony doors with her pistol drawn (p. 239). Linking the film and other sensational serials to the context of transformations in the social reality and cultural construction of womanhood, Ben Singer's fascinating analysis shows also how the serials and the sensational melodrama they exemplify reflect and refract the broader context of modernity. Evident not only in the destabilization of traditional ideologies of gender so visible in the polemical *The Lightning Raider* and in discourse about the 'New Woman' – characteristic of the cultural discontinuity of modernity – this reflection/refraction is visible also in the narrative, thematic and representational incorporation of what Singer sees as a widespread cultural appetite for powerful stimuli and sensation integral to modernity.

Like other recent work on early cinema, Singer's account seeks to unearth and rethink cinema's emergence within the sensory environment of urban modernity and its interactions with adjacent elements in the emergent visual culture of advanced capitalism.

Kracauer's and Benjamin's suggestive comments on the connections between a modernity exemplified by the metropolis and what Benjamin described as the 'new and urgent need for stimuli' demonstrated by cinema are important here, and one of the strengths of this book is to flesh this out by precisely detailing the emergence of a new culture of sensationalism in the turn-of-the-century city that occasioned a markedly quicker, more fragmented, disorientating and transient world (pp. 59–100). Included in Singer's analysis are a number of fascinating images unearthed from newspapers and popular magazines that substantiate this sense of sensationalism and also document for Singer the widely recognized re-articulation of subjective experience integral to the rise of the modern metropolis. Important to Singer's account is thus the argument that the environment of urban modernity and the new textures of everyday life shaped perception, subjective experience, and cinema.

Labelled by Charlie Keil and David Bordwell 'the modernity thesis', the work on the connections between the environment of urban modernity, sensational amusements and cinema has been challenged on the grounds that it proposes a too linear account of the relation between art and society, that it negates a fine-grained analysis of texts and textual transformation (and in particular does not explain and indeed may be contradicted by the shift from a 'cinema of attractions' to a cinema of narrative integration), and that it is based on a spurious sense of the possibility of perceptual transformation. In a long chapter on this debate, Singer proposes a more nuanced account of the thesis. Is it plausible that urban modernity brought about tangible changes in perception? The answer for Singer is a cautious yes, for he suggests that research in neurobiology, cognitive science and physiology can sustain the notion that transformations in the lived environment have consequences for perception (pp. 105–18). As Benjamin, Jonathan Crary and others have argued, then, perception itself emerges in Singer's account as historical, capable of short-term transformation in conjunction with broader social transformations – that is, perception has a social and cultural history. Is it then plausible to argue that the putative perceptual changes affected movies and cinema? The answer for Singer is more straightforwardly yes, and he surveys some of the ways this was thought about in the work of the first generation of modernity theorists – for example, that film functioned as a kind of immunization against the shock of the modern environment, or as a compensatory response to the impoverishment of experience in modernity. More generally he argues that it is imperative that scholars continually seek to trace out the connections between social and cultural contexts and texts (pp. 118–130). The inability to pin down all those connections need not, Singer contends, preclude observation of what appear to be significant correlations between the

social and artistic sphere, here understood as the history of sensation and the history of commercial sensationalism

Equally important to Singer's account and thoughtful revision of the modernity thesis is a consideration of the broader methodological questions that the thesis begs about the connections between social and textual spheres. In his introduction Singer characterizes his approach as a 'contextualist' one, and throughout the book he is interested in carefully relating sensational amusements to varied contexts, exemplified by the example of the female heroines of the serials, linked by Singer to precise sociological, psychological and indeed intertextual contexts (pp. 8, 221–62). Kracauer's discussion of the methodology of Georg Simmel is accordingly quoted approvingly in Singer's conclusion: 'All expressions of spiritual/intellectual life are interrelated in countless ways. No single one can be extricated from this web of relations, since each is enmeshed in the web with all such expressions' (p. 289). Like Kracauer's Simmel, everywhere Singer looks, 'relations between phenomena impose themselves upon him'. It is one of the strengths of this book that these relations impose themselves equally strongly on his readers (p. 289). The careful delineation of these relations begun here will no doubt be considered further in future scholarship. Considered in this way, the divide between Singer, Bordwell and Keil is between a different sense of the contextualization of texts and the different weighting of causative forces which propel and shape textual developments.

Leaving the broader contextual and methodological questions aside, it is the historicization of sensational melodrama which is, I think, the most important achievement of this book. Singer's redefinition of the terrain of melodrama is crucial. Like other recent genre theorists, Singer argues that it is imperative to reconfigure the contemporary historical articulation of melodrama, and in doing so he discovers that linking the genre solely to domesticity and structures of pathos are out of synch with turn-of-the-century descriptions. Here melodrama as a genre is recognized as a context for sensational action, violence, thrills, awesome sights and spectacles of physical peril, such as Lightning's dramatic entrance into the anthropology meeting (pp. 37–58). The intertextual relations between theatre and cinema are important to Singer's account of the melodramatic context of early film, as he argues that the stage melodrama set the parameters for sensational film melodrama and that both forms shared narrative motifs and a mutual stress on violent acts and spectacular diegetic realism (pp. 149–88). Yet the nickelodeon boom effectively destroyed cheap stage melodrama in urban centres; a consequence of the greater potential for diegetic realism in cinema, the economic benefits of circulating film prints rather than theatre troupes, and the consequent low cost of nickelodeon attendance for working-class and immigrant groups who had principally frequented stage melodrama (pp. 163–88). Melodrama, Singer demonstrates, has

both a coherent history and a formative impact on the shaping of American cinema.

Akin to the best of recent cultural and cinema history, *Melodrama and Modernity* manifests a judicious mix of theory and extraordinary historical research. The careful, thoughtful and nuanced account of the context of modernity and sensational melodrama is an important addition to recent scholarship on the cultural contexts of early cinema. Equally, Singer's recontextualization of the genre of melodrama and his account of its formative impact on American cinema significantly advances our knowledge of the history of melodrama and American cinema. *Melodrama and Modernity* deserves to be widely read, debated, and used.